

Southern New Hampshire University

Famine and Diaspora in the Emerald Isle

An Gorta Mór --The Irish Potato Famine and its impact on Irish migration

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History

By

Tara Leigh Workman

Macon, Georgia

Submitted March, 2019

Student: Tara Leigh Workman

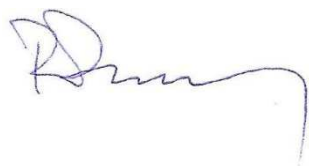
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Abstract

Throughout the history of Ireland, England, and the United States there have been many differing opinions about the causes, and yet more importantly, the effects of the *An Gorta Móhr*, also known as the Great Hunger or the Great Famine. The Irish potato famine played a significant role in the migration patterns from Ireland to the United States, however, much of the research has solely focused on the men in these migration patterns. The women involved in these migration patterns, long neglected and overlooked by historians, were equally important to the history of the famine and subsequent migration patterns from Ireland to the United States. The men, women, and children impacted by the Irish potato famine experienced excruciating heartache and loss, as well as extreme conditions and deprivation. Yet, through it all, those who were able to migrate to the United States contributed to the growth of the Irish population and protected Irish culture. Even after their arrival, these men and women endured hardship and faced discrimination, yet they became a unique part of the United States by contributing to the overall growth, development, and culture of the Irish in America.

This project will discuss the importance of studying the impacts of the Irish potato famine on the people of Ireland, particularly the women and children who were profoundly impacted yet often unstudied throughout history. The potato famine had profound effects on the lives of the Irish peoples which subsequently impacted life in Ireland, migration patterns, settlement patterns, and life in the new country to which people migrated. The use of primary sources such as artist renderings and journal entries provided a wealth of information that had previously been understudied, while the use of secondary sources provided details about background, historiographical trends and more. Both of which were instrumental in the completion of this project.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my family for their love, support, and encouragement throughout this labor of historical love. I also give thanks to my Heavenly Father for equipping me along this journey. Lastly, this research is for the Irish men, women, and children who endured this horrific struggle and lived to contribute to Irish and American memory and culture.

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Preface

A famine unprecedented in the history of the Western world, a chapter in human misery to harrow the human heart, was about to start, and even the little children could see its quick, sure approach in the nakedly fearful eyes and faces of their parents. A terrible sense of danger and dread descended on the land like the thick fog that covered the countryside on the fatal night, the fog that people in Ireland still speak of as the “potato fog.”¹

--Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*--

The Famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and of Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event.²

--Tony Blair, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, 1997--

--Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*--

¹ Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*, (San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1982), 8.

² Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology, and Rebellion*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the many history teachers that I had throughout high school and college, as they are the major contributors to my love for and interest in history.

Introduction

Throughout the history of Ireland, England, and the United States there have been many differing opinions about the causes, and yet more importantly, the effects of the *An Gorta Móhr*, also known as the Great Famine. The Irish potato famine played a significant role in the lives of Irish men, women, and children and their subsequent migration patterns from Ireland to the United States. The majority of existing research and literature, however, has primarily focused on the men, how they were affected by the famine, and their role in these migration patterns. The women involved in these migration patterns, long neglected and overlooked by historians, were equally important to the history of the famine and subsequent migration patterns from Ireland to the United States. The men, women, and children impacted by the Irish potato famine experienced excruciating heartache and loss, as well as extreme conditions and deprivation. Yet, through it all, those who were able to migrate to the United States contributed to the growth of the Irish population and protected Irish culture. Even after their arrival, these men and women endured hardship and faced discrimination, yet they became a unique part of the United States by contributing to the overall growth, development, and culture of the Irish in America.

Although women and children were profoundly affected by the famine, just as men were, there has consistently been much less research and therefore much less published about their particular part of the story. Much of the existing research about the Irish potato famine and its effects on the Irish people have primarily dealt with the causes of the Irish potato famine studied from a wide variety of lenses. While some famine research has been conducted through the

social and cultural lenses, much of this research has consistently studied the lives of Irish men, the ways that they were impacted, how their lives changed, and how they made certain choices for survival. While some historians have briefly covered how Irish women and children were impacted, there is still a significant gap in the overall research and historiography. Since women and children were equally affected by the famine, there should also be an equitable amount of research and literature about how they were impacted, how their lives were changed, and the choices they had to make. Although it was not common for newspapers and other periodicals throughout this time period to publish human-interest stories, especially about the average Irish person, there are some reports about the conditions found throughout Ireland as a result of the famine. Some of these reports are found in Irish newspapers, but very rarely are they found in British newspapers. The majority of reports dating back to the time of the famine often excluded the conditions of women and children and this seemed to create a precedent of excluding them from much of the research altogether.

By leaving a large percentage of the population out of the famine research altogether, a large majority of the true story has gone untold throughout history. Women's lives were significantly impacted by the Irish potato famine as they struggled for survival and made difficult life-changing choices. Women faced harsh conditions, often getting left behind as the menfolk traveled to neighboring cities looking for work, and often going without for the care of their families. As some women, single and married alike, chose to migrate away from Ireland, their lives and often their roles shifted along the journey and in their new settings. Irish women took on new roles in their new world in many new ways. Many Irish women began working outside the family home, earning wages, gaining a more advanced education, marrying later or not at all,

and contributing in ways that affected both their lives and the lives of others. Adding women and children back into the story, and history, is an essential part of famine research because it creates a more realistic and more complete study of the Irish potato famine, its effects, and the migration patterns that it caused.

The Irish Potato Famine occurred throughout Ireland during the years of 1846 to 1851. Despite the fact that the famine occurred for roughly six years, the effects of the famine had even greater long-lasting effects on Ireland. The famine greatly impacted the migration patterns of the Irish people from Ireland to both England and the United States. Since the 18th Century, the country of Ireland had long been dependent on the potato as its main staple crop. Western Ireland, which was largely populated by mostly poor tenant farmers who worked as subsistence farmers, felt the effects of the famine even more so than the rest of the population. Not only did the tenant farmers rely on the potato as their main source of income, they relied on it as their main source of food. Basically, the people who were already the poorest and needed the most help were the ones most affected by the famine. Although this was not the first time that Ireland had experienced failed crops, countless deaths, or emigration away from its shores, the Great Famine “stands by itself as one of the worst catastrophes of modern Irish history.”³

As author Cecil Woodham-Smith puts it, “at the beginning of the year 1845 the state of Ireland was, as it had been for nearly seven hundred years, a source of grave anxiety to England. Ireland had first been invaded in 1169; it was now 1845, yet she had been neither assimilated nor subdued.”⁴ Ireland during this time had the makings of a “perfect storm.” The relationship

³ Arthur Gribben, *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 2.

⁴ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: 1845-1849*, (London: Penguin Group, 1962), 15.

between England and Ireland had long been a strained one. One source of strain was due to the Penal Laws dating back to 1695. These laws were aimed at eradicating Catholicism in Ireland. In effect, these laws

barred Catholics from the army and navy, the law, commerce, and from every civic activity. No Catholic could vote, hold any office under the Crown, purchase land, and Catholic estates were dismembered by an enactment directing that at the death of a Catholic owner his land was to be divided among all his sons, unless the eldest became a Protestant, when he would inherit the whole. Education was made almost impossible, since Catholics might not attend schools, nor keep schools, nor send their children to be educated abroad.⁵

As a result of the Penal Laws, upper class and middle class Irish citizens left the country or became absentee landlords, while the poorest had to stay and bear the brunt of the hardships. Another source of concern was widespread and rapid population growth in Ireland without the benefit of growth of industrialization, medical care, or wealth. The Poor Inquiry Act of 1835 said that almost seventy five percent of Ireland existed without regular employment and “the possession of a piece of land was literally the difference between life and death”⁶ for many. Travelers to Ireland were appalled at the conditions found there and many wrote letters to the British government letting them know exactly how bad it was.

In 1843 the Earl of Devon created the Devon Commission to research and report on the living conditions in Ireland. The Devon Commission reported back with four classifications of homes found; lowest of the four were windowless, single-roomed mud cabins in which furniture was considered to be a luxury item. Many of the poorest of the poor actually just put roofs over ditches, burrowed into banks, and existed in bog holes. According to Susan Campbell Bartoletti, author of *Black Potatoes*, much of Ireland’s pre-famine poverty was blamed on the land system.

⁵ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 27.

⁶ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 32.

Even though industrialization had come to England in the 1700s, most of Ireland relied on the land for their living. The land system divided people into three classes: landowners, farmers, and farm laborers. Landowners who had emigrated before the famine left land agents in charge and were mainly just interested in collecting their rents from their tenant farmers and farm laborers, rather than caring for the land or the people who worked it. Even farmers who paid their rents were not always secure, however. Farmers had no rights and no lease for the land, so they could be evicted at any time.⁷

Since before the 18th Century, the country of Ireland had long been dependent on the potato as their main staple crop. The potato allowed for large quantities of food to be produced for a low cost on a small amount of land. The potato famine was caused by the spread of a mold called *Phytophthora infestans*, better known as blight, which caused the potatoes to literally rot as they were growing underground. As the potatoes were supposed to be growing, they were actually rotting and spreading the blight to neighboring healthy plants. Oftentimes farmers would not find out their crops were rotten until they were being harvested. The initial destruction of crops occurred in 1845, but continued consecutively throughout 1849. Due to the fact that the Irish population depended so heavily on the potato, this blight was demographically devastating to the people and the country. Compounding the devastation of the famine was also one of the harshest winters in recent Irish history. The potato blight impacted countries throughout Europe, including Flanders, southern France, Switzerland, eastern Germany, southern Scandinavia, and Scotland. However, the blight spread the most rapidly throughout Ireland due to damp conditions found there. The Great Famine of Ireland is known as the worst famine to occur in Europe during

⁷ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 20-21.

the 19th Century due to its profound effects on Ireland where the population depended so overwhelmingly on the potato.⁸

Since Ireland was still a part of the United Kingdom and under the jurisdiction of England's leadership, it was partly England's responsibility to propose solutions to the famine. Prime Ministers Sir Robert Peel and Lord John Russell tried different methods to help alleviate the famine, but it was too little too late. When Peel decided to continue exporting most of Ireland's grains, rather than letting the grains stay and be used by the starving people, tensions mounted and often erupted into riots. Final responsibility ended up falling back on the Irish landowners who helped provide relief until they no longer could. In the book, *Black Potatoes*, Susan Campbell Bartoletti says that "after the potato crop failed, many landlords feared that their tenants would not pay their rent. To make sure they did, the landlords confiscated the livestock and grain crops as payment. For the Irish families who faced starvation, English landlordism seemed to be a curse upon them and their beloved Ireland."⁹

Many Irish farmers moved to larger cities looking for factory work, some ended up in workhouses, and millions moved from the country they loved to go to England, Canada or the United States. Many Irish men committed crimes simply to receive a sentence of transportation to Australia. "About one million people died from starvation or from typhus and other famine-related diseases. The number of Irish who emigrated during the famine may have reached two million. Ireland's population continued to decline in the following decades because of overseas emigration and lower birth rates."¹⁰ Many of the Irish who emigrated to England, Canada, and

⁸ Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History*, (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 89.

⁹ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 20-21.

¹⁰ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 11.

the United States had to travel on overcrowded and disease ridden ships. These ships were often known as “coffin ships” due to their deplorable conditions and high mortality rates. Irish emigrants often had to sign up as indentured servants just to afford passage. Instead of finding welcome and help when they arrived at their final destinations, many experienced harsh treatment and persecution, and some were even deported back to Ireland.

Taking all of these factors into account, historians since the 100th anniversary, but especially since the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine have broached the causes and effects from quite a number of points of view. While there appears to be plenty of research on the relationship between England and Ireland, research on the causes and effects of the famine have only begun to vary in these most recent decades. Historiographical research closer to the famine and even up to the 1960s was very benign and vague, possibly to avert any conflicts between England and Ireland, especially due to the rise of Irish nationalism. The last twenty to thirty years, however, have seen the most growth of historiographical research about the Irish Potato Famine. Historiography has tended to alternate between neglect, revision, and support of the nationalist interpretation of the Great Famine.

The Irish Potato Famine was not something that many historiographers really delved into or wrote about until the sesquicentennial anniversary of the famine. Since that time, however, historians mostly from Ireland, England, and the United States have all sought in some way to explain the political, economic, social, and cultural ramifications of the Irish Potato Famine on their respective countries and the world. The impacts of the Irish Potato Famine can be seen on the local, national, and international levels. Men, women, and children had to deal with the tragic circumstances of the famine as it affected their livelihoods and, therefore, their lives.

Approximately seventy-five percent of all Irish migrants chose to travel to the United States in order to seek new lives and better opportunities.¹¹ These migration patterns greatly impacted the population remaining in Ireland, impacting demographic data for years to come. This migration stream also greatly influenced American history in terms of settlement patterns, ethnic and cultural make up, political and economic viewpoints, and more. This topic is incredibly important to study due to its significant local, national, and international ramifications as well as its unique role in the development of both Irish and United States history. Author Jay P. Dolan states that “the history of Ireland and Irish America changed forever when famine struck in the mid-1840s.”¹² Despite the catastrophic and permanent changes that the famine had on Ireland and the Irish people, the famine “inspired numerous songs, poems, and stories”¹³ which have commemorated the tragedies, told the stories of those that tried to make a difference in a horrible time, and kept memories alive that could have been easily lost to history otherwise.

Although the famine happened from the years 1846 to 1851, true scholarly research and writing did not start until the 1960s and the research did not really gain momentum until the 1990s. Due to the fact that much research about the famine in general did not occur until one hundred to one hundred fifty years after the event, much of the research has only focused on broad, general topics and causes. Most of the current research provides a thorough study of the political and economic effects, while the social and cultural effects are still quite limited. One reason why the social and cultural explanations could be overlooked is due to the lack of early written records of the famine, unreliable or biased firsthand accounts, and the fact that research

¹¹ R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, *The Great Famine: Studies In Irish History, 1845-52*, (Dublin, Ireland: The Lilliput Press, Ltd., 1994), 376.

¹² Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History*, (New York, New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 68.

¹³ Dolan, *The Irish Americans*, 68.

into this side of the story did not really start until the 1990s. Rather than looking at the “history from below” especially in regards to the women and children who were affected, most research has been devoted to only the men affected or to other topics entirely. One part of the social and cultural history of the famine lacking in research is in gender history, particular the effects of the famine on the women and children of Ireland.

While most scholarly research since the 1960s has focused on the political and economic lenses of the famine, research about the social and cultural lenses of the famine are relatively new. Although scholarly research during the 1990s did begin to turn the focus towards the social and cultural sides of the famine, there is still a significant void in the area of gender history or women’s history, particularly as to specific research about the effects of the famine on the women and children of Ireland. Historians of the Irish potato famine have sought to provide a wide variety of explanations about the effects of the famine. Most historians have in some way explained the political, economic, social, and cultural impacts while examining the famine from either a nationalist or revisionist nature yet have left voids in topics such as women’s history and gender history.

Although the first person to really open the door to renewed famine research was the historian and author Cecil Woodham-Smith, as a female she has been criticized as not being a “true historian” and was often overlooked as a valid scholar simply due to her gender. Therefore most of the famine research since has been conducted by men and most research has been consistently focused on men. While all of the historical writings used, especially from Irish or Irish American historians, has the potential to be biased by personal opinions or historiographical trends, all of the authors used are widely known and acclaimed, providing vast amounts of

research on their respective viewpoints. Adding the study of women back into the overall research and history of the famine will provide a more well-rounded and thorough view of the Irish potato famine and its importance throughout both Irish and United States history. The effects of the Irish potato famine have left many stories yet to be told.

Chapter 1: History & Historiography of the Irish potato famine

We are a vibrant first-world country,
But we have a humbling third-world memory.

--Mary McAleese, 8th President of Ireland from 1997 to 2011--

The study of the Irish potato famine began to emerge as a major topic of research and literature during the 1960s and then grew again during the 1990s as a result of the 150th year anniversary of the events. Historians in Ireland, England, and the United States began to delve into the dark recesses of Irish history to research and discuss the Irish potato famine, its causes and effects, as well as the impacts felt by the individuals and the countries that they inhabited. Historiographers of the Irish potato famine have sought to provide a wide variety of explanations about the effects of the famine. Most historians have in some way explained the political, economic, social, and cultural impacts while examining the famine from either a nationalist or revisionist nature. Despite the amount of research and literature about the Irish potato famine, there is still research yet to be done, especially in regards to the social and cultural history lenses, and the gender history lens in particular. The impacts of the famine on the women in the population have long been an area of research understudied, as many historians continue to study similar topics of research. The implication of studying the Irish potato famine without devoting research into the story of Irish women is profound indeed and should not continue to be overlooked.

Historiography about the Irish potato famine is quite varied based on the time period written, historical lenses that authors were influenced by or those which they used, and their personal views about the famine. Historians like Cecil Woodham-Smith and James Donnelly

provide a less emotional, revisionist interpretation; other historians like John Mitchel, John Kelly, and Tim Pat Coogan provide a more emotional, nationalist interpretation. Cormac Ó Gráda seems to be the main historian to take a good look at all sides of the effects of the famine, giving both nationalist and revisionist arguments with interdisciplinary research to back up his claims. Most of the research provides a thorough study of the political and economic effects, while the social and cultural effects are more limited. One reason why the social and cultural could be lacking is due to the lack of early written records of the famine, unreliable or biased firsthand accounts, and the fact that research into this side of the story did not really start until the 1990s. Another area lacking in famine research is in women's history or gender history. Although some historians have addressed the impact of men leaving their families for work or being transported for committing crimes, there is not much information on the actual impacts on the women or children of Ireland.

Since the sesquicentennial of the Irish Potato Famine, one of the very first historians to really look at the famine from multiple angles was Cecil Woodham-Smith of England. Woodham-Smith's work has been considered to be the premier account and source of information about the effects of the famine. Her book, *The Great Hunger*, published in 1962, led many historians to start looking at the famine in a totally different light altogether. Many historians up to this point looked at this as an unfortunate occurrence, but Woodham-Smith's account of the Irish Potato Famine focuses mainly on the political and economic causes and effects of the famine, while placing a majority of the blame on the British government and their lack of aid to the Irish. Despite the fact that Woodham-Smith was from England, she focuses on that nation and its lack of response as one of the main sources of destructiveness.

Woodham-Smith places much of the blame on two British Prime Ministers: Sir Robert Peel and Lord John Russell, although it was the Minister of Finance Sir Charles Trevelyan who receives most of the blame. Both Peel and Russell had ideas to help Ireland, which included creating public works projects, building more poor-houses or work-houses, and providing for soup kitchens to be built. Peel and Russell had some nice ideas, but “all expenditure required Treasury sanction: the money to be spent on famine relief, the expenses of the Relief Commission, the grants for the Poor Law, for public works, for medical services; and at the Treasury, standing guard over the British nations’ money-bags, was the formidable figure of Charles Edward Trevelyan.”¹ In a later attempt to help, Peel would secretly broker a deal with North America to import so-called “Indian corn” which would eventually be called “Peel’s brimstone” because it was so hated. Although Peel was trying to help, he invariably made things worse. The “Indian corn” was not a product that the Irish were familiar with, it couldn’t be used right away, it had to be milled and hardly anyone in Ireland had a mill, and so on. Even though Ireland grew corn, wheat, and other grains almost everything was owned by the landlords and directly exported to England or other countries. Ireland was one hundred percent dependent on potatoes.

Woodham-Smith also points to the influence of the philosophy of *laissez faire* economics as a source of conflict. *Laissez faire* economics asserted that the government should interfere in economic issues as little as possible. Although Peel, Russell, and Trevelyan all subscribed to these views, it was Minister of Finance Trevelyan who really stuck to them. Woodham-Smith states that “almost without exception the high officials and politicians responsible for Ireland

¹ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: 1845-1849*, (London: Penguin Group, 1962), 58.

were fervent believers in non-interference by Government, and the behavior of the British authorities only becomes explicable when their fanatical belief in private enterprise and their suspicions of any action which might be considered Government action are borne in mind.”²

Even though the British government agreed to start giving some type of relief to the Irish, it was slow going. British leaders were cautious and skeptical and many thought that the reports of devastation were exaggerated, because “the Irish, they said, had always had a tendency to exaggerate.”³ Susan Campbell Bartoletti, the author of numerous books, including *Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine*, argues that progress was so slow going due to the British attitude and biases towards the Irish. She says that some believed the Irish brought the famine on themselves because they didn’t work hard enough; some believed they depended too much on potatoes, and some said they listened too much to poor advice from their priests.⁴ Unfortunately, many of these prevailing attitudes colored the actions of the British government throughout the famine.

Eventually, Sir Robert Peel authorized a Scientific Commission to be created in order to investigate the authenticity of the problem. Scientists studied the blight and made recommendations for farmers to use the potatoes regardless of the disease. Those who tried to follow these instructions often became very sick and many of the elderly and young actually died. Finally, in the spring of 1846, relief began to arrive, but many people had already begun to starve. People were “eating anything that could conceivably be devoured, food that stank, diseased potatoes that brought sickness and caused death in pigs and cattle.”⁵ Bartoletti says that

² Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 54.

³ Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1850*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 35.

⁴ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 35-36.

⁵ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 70.

“one of the harsh realities about famine is not about a lack of food; famine is about who has access to food.”⁶ She argues that England did not intend for the Irish people to starve, but they also did not create laws that would greatly benefit the Irish. Rather, they continued to enact laws to the benefit of landowners and merchants that would not interfere with *lassiez faire* policies.

Bartoletti’s main argument in *Black Potatoes* centers on the poignant and stark realities of the Irish potato famine through the eyes of those who lived it—the Irish people themselves. Bartoletti’s work gives a brief history of the relationship between Ireland and England and then gives first-hand accounts of the famine as told by people who survived the famine and their family members. Bartoletti’s primary source information comes from a wide array of sources, such as autobiographical work, newspaper articles, letters from top-ranking officials like Queen Victoria and Prime Minister Robert Peel, interviews conducted by the Irish Folklore Commission from the 1930s-1950s, and oral histories collected by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Some of the earliest information was recorded by field workers who were researching the famine and provides mainly all of the information that historians have from a first-hand, everyday person’s perspective.

Another pre-eminent scholar of the Irish Potato Famine is Irish American author James S. Donnelly, Jr. who began his research by finding a profound lack of information about the famine in Irish sources. Donnelly says that although pre-famine research had increased, research about the famine itself was quite sparse. He says that for decades “professional historians carried on the important task of revising our understanding of the Irish past without paying much heed to the most cataclysmic event in the modern history of the country.”⁷ In his article “The Great Famine

⁶ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 56-57.

⁷ James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 11.

and its interpreters, old and new” published in 1993, Donnelly addresses the wide array of opinions about the famine, suggesting that many historians either take a nationalist or revisionist interpretive point of view. Since Cecil Woodham-Smith was the main writer about the famine for some time, her work was the jumping off point for many. Commentators seemed to either vehemently agree or disagree with her work. Donnelly says that many revisionist scholars believed that Woodham-Smith’s *The Great Hunger* compelled emotional displays that could lead to biased research of the famine and views of the famine as genocide, while nationalist scholars believed it did not provoke enough emotion or provide adequate detail to reflect Ireland’s suffering.⁸

In Donnelly’s book *The Great Irish Potato Famine* published in 2001, he again studies the differing views of the famine, mainly focusing on the revisionist and anti-revisionist points of view. James Donnelly, considered to be a premier scholar of the Great Famine, had previously only published his works about the famine in academic realms. This book has really been the only book made available to public audiences interested in the famine. Donnelly’s book garnered interest in the Irish potato famine which led historians, students and those interested to continue the research about the famine. After the 150th anniversary of the famine, interest in the subject of the Irish potato famine soared, Donnelly furthered his research and published his former works for the public. Donnelly’s book primarily addresses the changing attitudes and opinions about the famine, comparing the nationalist and revisionist interpretations of the famine. He discusses British policies in Ireland, the relationship between landlords and their tenants, the so-called coffin ships used by emigrants, and so much more. An important revisionist scholar, Kevin

⁸ James S. Donnelly, Jr., “The Great Famine and its interpreters, old and new,” *History Ireland: Features*, Issue 3 (Autumn 1993), <http://www.historyireland.com/the-famine/the-great-famine-and-its-interpreters-old-and-new/>

Nowlan, said that the main issue “lay in the totality of that social order which made such a famine possible and which could tolerate, to the extent that it did, the sufferings and hardship caused by the failure of the potato crop.”⁹ Donnelly argues that Nowlan’s argument is reflected in the revisionist view that “no one was to blame because everyone was.”¹⁰ Many of the primary sources in Donnelly’s book are pictures to show particular events or scenes from the famine. Examples include paintings, political cartoons, etchings, and more.

Christine Kinealy, author of *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology, and Rebellion* published in 2002, also suggests that the revisionist view had been the main school of thought on the famine since the 1930s and that it had “argued that the Famine was not a significant event in modern Irish history, but that it merely acted as a catalyst for changes which were occurring anyway.”¹¹ Although Kinealy agrees that Woodham-Smith’s book was influential, she believes that there were several events that had a greater impact. These include cultural revival within Ireland, writings happening around the same time as ceasefires declared by the Irish Republican Army between 1994-1996, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s 1997 speech about England’s role in the famine. Kinealy argues that all of these events inspired renewed interest in famine research, and not just in the historical community, but in Ireland and other places as well.¹² Christine Kinealy’s book details the historical relationship between England and Ireland, the varied opinions of historians who have written about the famine, immediate reactions to the famine, and short and long-term relief efforts. Kinealy’s main mention of women during the famine is about women involved in the relief effort, stating that “women played an important

⁹ James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 17-18.

¹⁰ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 18.

¹¹ Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology, and Rebellion*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 2.

¹² Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 1-5.

role in a number of charitable organizations.”¹³ Kinealy uses primary sources from several Prime Ministers’ letters and speeches from the famine time period through modern times, showing widely disparate views of the famine and its effects. She also incorporates information from newspapers and even archaeologist’s reports.

One of the main anti-revisionist arguments came from Brendan Bradshaw, a Cambridge scholar originally from Ireland. According to Donnelly, Bradshaw argued that “the revisionists had employed a variety of interpretive strategies in order to filter out the trauma in the really catastrophic episodes of Irish history.”¹⁴ Although Bradshaw’s comments provoked heated controversy, they also provoked scholarly debate and renewed interest. Another view point, although very controversial in nature, was proposed by one of the earliest nationalist writers, Irish journalist and leader of the Young Irelanders, John Mitchel, who vehemently argued the case of genocide against the Irish during the 1840s. Donnelly says about Mitchel that he “was perfectly convinced—and convinced many others—that the consequences of British policy were not unintended but rather deliberately pursued.”¹⁵

Many nationalist scholars, including John Mitchel and others from soon after the famine, were drastically influenced by the oral tradition about the famine, which can often include partial, biased, or selective information. What Donnelly ultimately argues for is fair and balanced research, whether from a nationalist or revisionist perspective. He states that “as the great majority of professional historians of Ireland now recognize, it is that a million people should not have died in the backyard of what was then the world’s richest nation” and that “historians do

¹³ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 70.

¹⁴ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 13.

¹⁵ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 19.

well to remember and to preserve that sense of moral outrage among nationalists as well as the record of what provoked it.”¹⁶

Irish economic historian, Cormac Ó Gráda, provides a unique and differing approach to the Irish Potato Famine in his book *Black 47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* published in 1999. Ó Gráda examines the famine from a mainly economic and sociological perspective by bringing in information from interdisciplinary and comparative sources, including research that he believed was previously neglected. Ó Gráda says that in the “heavily urbanized Ireland of the 1990s, “famine memory” probably owes more to Cecil Woodham Smith’s bestseller, recycled versions of the *saeva indignatio* of journalist John Mitchel, and the discoveries of local historians than to any genuine, unbroken link with the 1840s.”¹⁷ Ó Gráda incorporates multiple disciplines to compare the Irish famine to other well-known famines, such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa. Comparisons include numbers of people killed as a percentage of total population, geography of the region affected, economic stability of the countries involved, and attitude towards helping those impacted by the famine.

Ó Gráda argues that when taking these factors into account, the Irish famine was truly a “great famine” and quite devastating. Ó Gráda believes that by using a comparative approach “Irish historians who have sought to talk down the Irish famine is that, far from cutting the Irish famine down to size, it highlights its significance in the world history of famines”¹⁸ and how proportionally destructive it was. He does not believe that the famine was purposeful, like some nationalist proponents believe, but that it was “largely the by-product of a dogmatic version of

¹⁶ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 245.

¹⁷ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black 47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

¹⁸ Ó Gráda, *Black 47 and Beyond*, 12.

political economy, not the deliberate outcome of anti-Irish racism.”¹⁹ When it comes to the study of the famine’s folklore, however, Ó Gráda is quite cautionary and skeptical. He encourages students of the famine to realize that any oral tradition can be consciously or subconsciously selective, especially due to the highly emotional nature of the subject and the length of time it took to be recorded. Despite Ó Gráda’s cautions, he does note the importance of oral tradition, especially when trends can be found in stories.²⁰

One of the most well-known Irish economic historians, Cormac Ó Gráda, provides a unique and differing approach to the Irish potato famine in his book *Black 47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*. Ó Gráda examines the famine from a mainly economic and sociological perspective by bringing in information from multiple disciplines. He analyzes the causes and effects in a very detailed and thorough manner. Ó Gráda compares the life expectancies of men and women during the famine, especially those in workhouses or poorhouses where records were kept of their food rations.²¹ Ó Gráda also incorporates information from Irish folklore and tradition, as well as primary source information from personal and professional journals, census reports, and more.

On the more extreme nationalist side of the argument are two Irish historians: John Kelly and Tim Pat Coogan. In his book *The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People*, John Kelly gives a more narrative approach to detailing the famine. He looks at the famine from a social, cultural, and economic viewpoint. He analyzes first-hand accounts of the famine in Ireland and England and traces the migration patterns of those who fled Ireland. While studying the migration patterns, Kelly also notes how familial relationships in Ireland

¹⁹ Ó Gráda, *Black 47 and Beyond*, 10.

²⁰ Ó Gráda, *Black 47 and Beyond*, 195-197.

²¹ Ó Gráda, *Black 47 and Beyond*, 101-104.

drastically changed and how that affected the Irish demographics. Kelly uses many primary sources which pertain to the plight of women and children during the famine; however, his inclusion of women seems to be a minor part of the story, as he often portrays them as characters living through the famine, rather than active participants in the famine history. Kelly uses primary sources from the famine time period such as newspaper articles, letters, journal entries, census reports, and much more. One example is from the journals of surgeon William Wilde, who describes scenes of the Irish famine, including women hastily farming rotten potatoes so their children would have something to eat, women trying to harvest crops and finding nothing to harvest, and children literally dying from starvation. On his travels throughout Ireland Dr. Wilde recorded how quickly the potato blight occurred, with crops literally rotting into blackness overnight, reeking of a powerful stench that stayed in the memory. Conditions throughout Ireland were deplorable, yet the knowledge about how horrendous it was did not seem to get back to England or garner much attention or support.

In the introduction to his book *The Graves Are Walking* published in 2012, John Kelly says that,

John Mitchel, a founding father of modern Irish nationalism, depicted the British officials who presided over the famine as genocidal gargoyles. They were not. In the main, they were wakeful-minded, God-fearing, and—by their own lights—well-intentioned men, and that is what makes them so depressing. If the famine has any enduring lesson to teach, it is about the harm that even the best are capable of when they lose their way and allow religion and political ideology to traduce reason and humanity.²²

While Kelly does support the nationalist point of view proposed by John Mitchel, he also notes that many of Mitchel's claims were often misguided and distorted. Kelly argues that many Irish

²² John Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People*, (New York: Picador, 2012), 4.

people, including scholars, have adopted the nationalist view because it is the most emotionally satisfying way to explain the famine. He states that “bureaucratic delays and incompetence, legislative measures and tax policy, cowardice on the part of some officials and stupidity on the part of others—such explanations sounded too small, too trivial, too lacking in supreme malevolence to explain the disappearance of a third of the Irish nation.”²³ Although Kelly says that the policies and the intent behind them were not genocidal in nature, the effects of the famine were.

Tim Pat Coogan, author of *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy* published in 2012, and strong supporter of the nationalist view of the famine gathered many of his conclusions from archival evidence provided from the National Library of Ireland such as letters written by British members of Parliament, minutes of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends (Quakers), and much more. Coogan also takes to task many of the former historiographers of the famine, including Cecil Woodham-Smith, James Donnelly, and even Cormac Ó Gráda who is considered to be the most respected Irish economic historian of the famine. Coogan points out that although Woodham-Smith and Donnelly mention Sir Charles Trevelyan's role in the relief efforts or lack thereof, neither of the historians go much farther. Coogan believes that much more of the blame should fall on Trevelyan due to his job as the Minister of Finance.²⁴ Coogan mainly disagrees with Ó Gráda's arguments about the economic side of the famine. About Ó Gráda's research, Coogan states that “his scholarship is beyond reproach; however, I do question his judgments on food exports during the Famine. Ó

²³ Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 310-311.

²⁴ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy*, (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 101-102.

Gráda argues that the retention of the exported food would have made little or no difference in making up for the loss of the potato.”²⁵

Coogan believes that many economic historians discount the impact that this exported food could have had on saving lives and that any extra food could have made a difference, however negligible it might have been. Coogan also argues that the memories of the famine have impacted people’s view of it. He states that “the archive literally tells us how people both survived the Famine and then tried to erase the survival methods from the folk memory.”²⁶ While looking at many firsthand accounts of the famine, Coogan comes to the conclusion that many people just seemed to want to forget the atrocities of this time period. Coogan proceeds to analyze the decisions made about the famine compared to the United Nations Convention on Genocide, including the definition and means used, stating that “certainly in the years 1846-1851 responsible Whig decision makers were complicit in genocide.”²⁷ He does acknowledge, however, that although he knows this is an extreme view of the famine, it is one worthy of looking into further.

Enda Delaney is a professor at the University of Edinburgh and the author of several books on Irish history and diaspora related to the famine. Delaney’s book *The Great Irish Famine: A History in Four Lives* is written in a narrative style detailing the famine through four different testimonies and viewpoints. These testimonies come from John MacHale, the Catholic Archbishop of Tuam, John Mitchel, an Irish nationalist, Elizabeth Smith, wife of an Irish landlord, and Charles Trevelyan, the assistant secretary to the English Treasury. This unique

²⁵ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 69.

²⁶ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 118.

²⁷ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 231-232.

analysis provides information from the political, economic, and social viewpoints of the famine which allows the reader to gain a variety of background information and analysis. Delaney's book builds on the research of many former Irish famine historians; however, his narrative approach makes the work connect with the reader on a much more personal level. His goal is to provide a well-rounded, thorough, and readable account of the Irish potato famine which is one of the worst, yet most defining, periods in Irish history. Delaney states that "retelling the well-known events of the Great Irish Famine through the lives and experiences of these four very different individuals allows for an intimate view on these tragic years."²⁸ Although this book evokes a very emotional response, it really lets the reader see how truly horrific the famine events were.

Although the first person to really open the door to renewed famine research was a female, Cecil Woodham-Smith, she has been criticized as not being a "true historian" and most of the research since has been conducted by men, which is interesting. Another area without much research is the current demographic makeup of Ireland since the famine and the impact of Irish coming to the United States, Canada, Australia, and other countries around the world. Although many people with Irish ancestry might know they have it, they might not truly know when or why it occurred. While all of the historical writings used, especially from Irish or Irish American historians, has the potential to be biased by personal opinions or historiographical trends, all of the authors used are widely known and acclaimed, providing vast amounts of research on their respective viewpoints.

²⁸ Enda Delaney, *The Great Irish Famine: A History in Four Lives*, (Dublin, Ireland: Gill & Macmillan, 2012), 5.

Although the historiography of the Irish potato famine covers a multitude of opinions and historiographical trends, and is researched from multiple different lenses there is still much of the history that is sadly lacking. Historians have thoroughly covered the causes of the famine, have debated the effects of the famine, and are constantly adding to the research about the causes and effects, yet much of the research already in existence has neglected to completely research or discuss the impacts of the famine on the women of Ireland. Some historians have included the plight of women almost as an afterthought, while others have added snippets of information throughout their work; however, none have truly created a work completely about the effects of the famine on women primarily. In order for a complete history of the famine to be thoroughly and realistically told, it must include all of the participants, including men, women, and children alike. If one group is left out of the story then the history as a whole is found wanting.

Chapter 2: Blight in the Emerald Isle

In Ireland long ago, there were good times,
Not your time nor my time but somebody's time...

--Traditional Beginning to an Irish Folktale--
--Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*--

The potato plant was first brought to Ireland from South America during the Age of Exploration throughout the sixteenth century as the Columbian exchange began connecting the Old World (Europe, Africa, and Asia) to the New World (the Americas and the Caribbean). By the nineteenth century the potato had become the essential staple crop throughout Ireland as people realized the amount of crop that could be produced for a small area of land, little monetary investment, and not much labor. The potato plant could produce a veritable bumper crop that could provide a family with plenty of food throughout the year. The importance of the potato to the success or failure of lives in Ireland should not be underestimated since it has been considered to be one of the most important plants to impact the Emerald Isle. The potato played a pivotal role in the present and future lives of the Irish people, so therefore the potato blight had a significance that cannot be underestimated either. The subsequent famine that occurred because of the *Phytophthora infestans* blight had a tremendous impact on the lives of people throughout Ireland starting in the 1840s and continuing for decades to come afterward. Effects ranging from severe loss of life, damage to the physical geography, and irreversible demographic and migration patterns forever altered the Emerald Isle and its people.

In the ten or so years preceding the Irish potato famine, the British government's Poor Enquiry Act stated that nearly "three-quarters of the labourers in Ireland existed without regular

employment of any kind”¹ which made a successful livelihood quite rare for the typical Irish worker. According to author Cecil Woodham-Smith unless these workers could “get a hold of a patch of land and grow potatoes on which to feed himself and his children, the family starved.”² The acquisition of even a small patch of land could be the matter of life or death, which made the instability of the potato crop life altering indeed. Under normal farming conditions Irish farmers could typically produce up to six tons of potatoes on an acre of land, which could potentially feed a family of six for approximately a year. The potato crop, if successful, could therefore produce a vast quantity of food on a small area of land for very little cost.

Potatoes could be used as food for people as well as livestock which made it a uniquely versatile crop. The success of the crop, however, depended on the type of potato being used, the weather throughout the year, and a number of other variables beyond the scope of human control. If the potato crop was the slightest bit unsuccessful, or worse, if it failed, then farmers as well as their families had nothing with which to replace the crop. Other staple crops such as wheat or oats were grown on approximately three quarters of cultivatable land in Ireland, yet the majority was exported to England throughout the year.³ Therefore the majority of the Irish population was really only using one quarter of their land to grow potatoes for their livelihood. To say that Ireland was thoroughly dependent on the potato as a staple crop would be an understatement.

On the eve of 1844 the potato crops throughout Ireland seemed to be producing well and farmers looked forward to their future success. Despite all the forecasts towards the positive,

¹ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 32.

² Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 32.

³ Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*, (San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1982), 20.

however, the potato crops soon gave signs that a failure might be imminent. The first signs of afflicted potatoes arose in County Cork; however, the disease, which was formerly unknown in Europe, seemed to stay localized without causing extreme amounts of damage. Farmers and government leaders took a sigh of relief, but none too soon the diseased potatoes appeared again, not just in County Cork but in several other areas as well. Farmers who thought that they had been raising healthy crops soon came to the realization that their potatoes were in fact quite diseased. Almost from one day to the next, farmers found “brown spots on the leaves, some of which were already withering and turning black.”⁴ Under closer inspection farmers found that entire plants were discolored and putrefying, while the disease gradually spread from plant to plant. Farmers believed that if they separated the rotting plants above ground from the potatoes below ground that the crop would be safe. However, when the farmers “dug down into the ground with their hands to check, they came up with a blackened mess of corruption—slimy pockets of potatoes that broke into mush under the slightest pressure.”⁵ The worst was now realized—blight had arrived full force.

For the majority of the population in Ireland, life during the late 1840s became a hellish nightmare. For centuries Irish life had been steeped in traditions of British landlordism, tenant farming, subsistence agriculture, deplorable living conditions, and the possibility of evictions, all which kept the populace caught in the constant struggle for survival. Add to that potato blight and Ireland was on the verge of a national disaster. Author John Kelly states that due to the unique dependence of the vast majority of people on the potato crop, “the profound nature of

⁴ Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*, 4.

⁵ Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*, 5.

Irish poverty made the Irish peasant acutely vulnerable to the potato's failure."⁶ Author of *Paddy's Lament* Thomas Gallagher states that "no one living in Ireland at the time who saw the rotting fields and caught their stench, who saw and heard the people wailing, had to be told that for the majority of its population all the great and simple purposes of existence were soon to be forgotten in the oncoming struggle with death."⁷

Mr. C.B. Gibson, a British relief official working in County Cork was in charge of touring the surrounding countryside. He noted several cases of people struggling to deal with the potato famine, including a young girl scraping through the ground with a spade and continually coming up with nothing but rotten potatoes. He found naked, starving children laying out in the fields, a malnourished woman trying to feed her recently deceased baby who had died for lack of nourishment, people wandering the countryside in search of food, and much worse. In his writings, Gibson stated, "Oh, if the people of England and the English ministry could see this."⁸ Despite travelers accounts and witness testimonies people in England often chose to ignore or overlook the desperate conditions in Ireland.

Primary source documents such as drawings featured in newspapers show the stark realities of the Irish potato famine with heartbreaking reality. The drawing below depicts a family of Irish peasants, including a woman and child trying desperately to dig up their fields in search of potatoes and another woman crying over her child. Although scenes such as this would have been commonplace throughout Ireland, it was not something often published or discussed and it definitely did not seem to garner any additional support for those suffering. Even though

⁶ Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 11.

⁷ Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*, 8.

⁸ Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 112.

this sketch clearly depicts women and children during the famine, it is typically only seen as additional piece of information, rather than a primary focus. This shows how often the plight of women and children has been overlooked in the famine history.



Figure 1: Woman and child dig for potatoes, while in the background a mother cries over her child. *Illustrated London News*, December 22, 1849.

While some people tried to survive on the land that they rented, others who had been evicted had no choice but to roam the countryside looking for food or work, as seen in the drawing below. While this would have been a fairly commonplace sight throughout Ireland during the potato famine, it was not something that English government leaders or the public would have been particularly familiar with or knowledgeable about. Eventually English government officials sent members of the Scientific Commission and different relief organizations to document what the conditions were like. English newspapers eventually sent their reporters or hired Irish reporters and artists to document the conditions and report back with their findings. Some of the stories and artist's sketches were published in some English newspapers, but many refused to print the stories and sketches because of deep-seated prejudices and stereotypes about the Irish people.



Figure 2: Barefoot and barely clothed children dig for turnips and other edible food to eat. *Illustrated London News*, February 20, 1847.



Figure 3: Woman and children wander the countryside after being evicted from their home. *The Pictorial Times*, February 14, 1846.

Irish people had no choice but to experiment with several different methods of survival as the potato crops continued to die off. For many people this meant eating things that they never would have thought of in order to simply survive. Some people used the partly rotten potatoes to create a meal called “boxty” which was made into a cookie-like hard cake, except the use of these rotten potatoes caused extreme side-effects like stomach cramps and bloody diarrhea. These “potatoes were especially harmful to the elderly and infants, some of whom became so sick that they died.”⁹ Other people had to resort to much more extreme survival methods. Some people resorted to killing and eating the starving dogs or rats that roamed the countryside, rather than being attacked and eaten by them first.

⁹ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 40.

Still others survived by extracting blood from cattle and horses, and making “relish cakes” which were a mixture of animal blood, mushrooms, and cabbage formed into patties and baked. Those that did not have dogs to kill or cattle to bleed would often maraud through the fields hoping to find a stray potato or some other kind of sustenance. Families also ate cabbage and turnips, leaves and bark, grasses, and berries and fruit from trees.¹⁰ Basically anything that could be used for survival was eaten by men, women, and children throughout Ireland. These resources, however, did not last forever or provide enough sustenance to really be worthwhile long-term.

One particular story tells of a destitute villager who was “found lying dead of starvation by the roadside, with pieces of grass or leaves in his mouth and his face stained with the juice of plants he had been chewing to satisfy his hunger.”¹¹ As people literally starved to death, witness testimonies reveal how completely deplorable the conditions in Ireland truly were. People who had been relatively healthy and well-fed appeared skeletal as their “flesh and muscle wasted away until the bones of their frames became barely covered, insecurely jointed, brittle, and easily broken.”¹² Among some of the worst afflicted were the still growing children whose bodies were completely affected by the lack of fat on their frames and deplorable diets. Author Thomas Gallagher states that the “staring eyes of these children told the story, the unbelievable, incomprehensible story of an entire population, under the protection and dominion of Great Britain, whose shoreline was little more than a day’s sail away, starving to death while their own country’s produce, cattle, and wheat, oats, and barley were being shipped”¹³ away from Ireland

¹⁰ Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament*, 11-13.

¹¹ Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament*, 15.

¹² Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament*, 36.

¹³ Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament*, 39.

to British ports. The failure of the potato crops were uniquely tied to the life and death of the Irish people.



Figure 4: When men had moved or were too sick to work, their wives and children took their places. *Illustrated London News*, August 12, 1843.

Perhaps one of the most hauntingly iconic yet underrated scenes from famine publications is the drawing of Bridget O'Donnell and her two surviving children. This particular sketch is uniquely significant due to its compelling poignancy in visually representing the famine history from the perspective of a mother and her only two surviving during the famine. It is a commonly held belief that Bridget O'Donnell's husband had already migrated either to England or to the United States in hopes of finding work and sending money back home. Due to the famine and lack of money, O'Donnell and her children were evicted from their home and forced to wander about. During this time, she lost her oldest son to fever and starvation and lost a child during childbirth. This is the story of a real woman who had to struggle to survive the famine and

shows the chilling realities of what many suffered. This story, however, also helps to demonstrate the shift in reporting more human-interest stories during this era. It is quite rare that a specific person, let alone an Irish, Catholic, woman, had a specific story written about her plight.

Primary sources such as this truly reflect the absolutely horrible nature of the situation that men, women, and children were trying to endure. They give a visual picture of life during the famine and help support my question about the situation women and children were living through. The famous engraving of Bridget O'Donnel and her children from the *Illustrated London News* published in 1849 has been recently turned into a memorial statue built in Clare, Ireland. This memorial provides the perfect example of how research about the women and children is so incredibly important. The plight of O'Donnel and her children has become immortalized in this memorial statue so that people can see the utter destruction of the famine. The study of women like Bridget O'Donnel is especially significant to famine research because her story helps represent the stories of countless other nameless women that found themselves in very similar situations.



Figure 5: Bridget O'Donnell with her two surviving children is perhaps one of the most archetypal images of the tragedy found in Ireland due to the haunting desperation and helplessness seen. *Illustrated London News*, December 22, 1849.

As the potato blight continued to spread all throughout Ireland, the press began to predict dismal failures which led to further heartache and despair. At the time of the blight the British government was led by Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, who was “unusual for an English politician in that he had lived in Ireland for six years when Chief Secretary in the Dublin Castle

Executive.”¹⁴ Despite Peel’s knowledge of Ireland and the potential for disaster, he and his government let their Irish prejudices color their decision making. When Peel and the British leadership received word of the disastrous potato blight he responded that the news was ““very alarming”, but added “there is such a tendency to exaggeration and inaccuracy in Irish reports that delay in acting upon them is only desirable.””¹⁵ Because of commonly held prejudices against the Irish by the British government, the government was quite slow to act in favor of waiting out the situation. Eventually Prime Minister Peel had the government create a Scientific Commission in order to investigate the true extent of the potato blight and loss of crops. After the Scientific Commission traveled to Ireland and reported back, their research showed that the famine claims were more underrated than exaggerated. Despite the Commission’s research, many government leaders continued to believe that the Irish were exaggerating their claims. This definitely hindered any help that could have been forthcoming, especially in terms of help for those most affected by the famine.

Against widespread opinion and commonly held beliefs, Prime Minister Peel began to discuss potential solutions, further issues, and effects of the famine with his fellow Parliament members. Peel created the Temporary Relief Commission which was supposed to “oversee the establishment of local relief committees whose main functions were to provide food to the local poor and to establish a limited system of public works.”¹⁶ In secret, Peel arranged for £100,000 worth of Indian corn to be purchased from the United States and imported to Ireland as a food replacement for the loss of potatoes. The Indian corn “was virtually unknown as a food in Ireland

¹⁴ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 33.

¹⁵ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 33.

¹⁶ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 34.

or any other part of the United Kingdom and was neither imported nor bought and sold.”¹⁷ One of the main reasons why Peel purchased the Indian corn was because it was one of the cheapest products that could be used as food.

The Indian corn became known as “Peel’s brimstone”¹⁸ because of its effects on the people who tried to eat it and the commonly held idea that it was somehow a way for England to persecute them further. The Indian corn coming to Ireland on a “Yankee” boat, as seen in the drawing below, was created to display how companies in the United States, Canada, and England profited from the famine. When they should have been helping to relieve the effects of the famine, companies were purchasing crops grown and exported from Ireland and then selling them inferior food products that people were unfamiliar with using.

¹⁷ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 55.

¹⁸ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 46.



Yankee corn dealer displaying his international reputation for avariciousness, from Yankee Doodle, 1846

Figure 6: Arrival of the “Indian corn” clearly shows the disparity in success as seen by the “Yankee” merchant on board the ship and those on shore awaiting food. *Yankee Doodle*, 1846.

Despite the potential aid opportunities, the creation of the relief committees as well as the purchase of the Indian corn was not quite soon enough. The timeline for relief was decided based upon how difficult the famine was predicted to be in the coming months. This help, however, was considered to be too little and too late.

Author Christine Kinealy argues that “although Peel’s policies were generally praised, from the outset they contained flaws which became more critical as famine persisted and

intensified.”¹⁹ Even after the arrival of the Indian corn the usefulness of it as a food source was essentially null and void. Because the Irish, and everyone else in the United Kingdom, were unused to the corn, there were no mills with which to grind it and no knowledge of how to prepare it. The relief that this could have provided as a food source, therefore, was no relief at all. Whatever helps could have come from Peel’s government came to an end when his party was defeated and a new Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, came to power. Russell’s government was obsessed with modernizing the Irish economy, which they believed could be made possible by transitioning away from potato dependence and by replacing the large majority of people at the bottom of the social scale with more people at the top instead.²⁰ In terms of leadership, Prime Minister Russell was considered to be quite weak and often vacillated over his decision making, which meant that relief from the British government to Ireland was greatly compromised. Counties were forced to help pay for the relief in the form of increased taxes and matching funds from the government were cut in half. Once again the majority of people that needed the most aid were the very ones that actually received the least amount of necessary relief.

Another major issue that affected the Irish population was the unfortunate social structure, division of land, and the custom of evictions. The land system was structured so that people were divided into three classes, including the wealthy and powerful landowners or landlords, farmers, and farm laborers. Most landlords lived in England and hired land agents to manage their estates in Ireland. Most of the landlords were simply interested in the money the land rents could bring in and did little to improve their lands or properties. Farmers, depending on the amount of land that they “held” or rented, could make a fairly comfortable living. By far,

¹⁹ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 35.

²⁰ Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 36.

the lowest of the low were the farm laborers who rented tiny areas of land in order to grow potatoes. Besides working on this rented land, farm laborers were also expected to work for the farmer and landlord as well. Tenant farmers paid a high price for renting the land and even when the rent was paid, there was no guarantee of their rights because they could be evicted at any point in time.²¹

Author Thomas Gallagher states that “incredibly, neither official reports nor published eyewitness accounts of conditions in Ireland did anything to stem or defer the eviction of tenants who failed to pay their rents”²² whenever they were due. Peasants, farmers, and anyone who made their living off of producing potatoes could obviously not pay their bills, including rent on their farm land and homes, which meant that due to the famine, the majority of people fell into arrears of rent and were therefore evicted from their homes. Regardless of the circumstances, landlords whether living in Ireland or in England often executed evictions through the use of British police forces in Ireland. Rather than simply evicting the families from their homes, the British police forces employed Irish “house wreckers” to work alongside them. Scenes of eviction as pictured in the *Illustrated London News* drawing below were only too commonplace throughout Ireland during the potato famine. As families were evicted from their homes they were forced out to wander the countryside looking for food, work, shelter, and any potential help for survival.

²¹ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 19-21.

²² Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*, 44.



Figure 7: Irish family pleads with the local sheriff on eviction day while soldiers stand ready to use force if necessary. *Illustrated London News*, December 16, 1848.

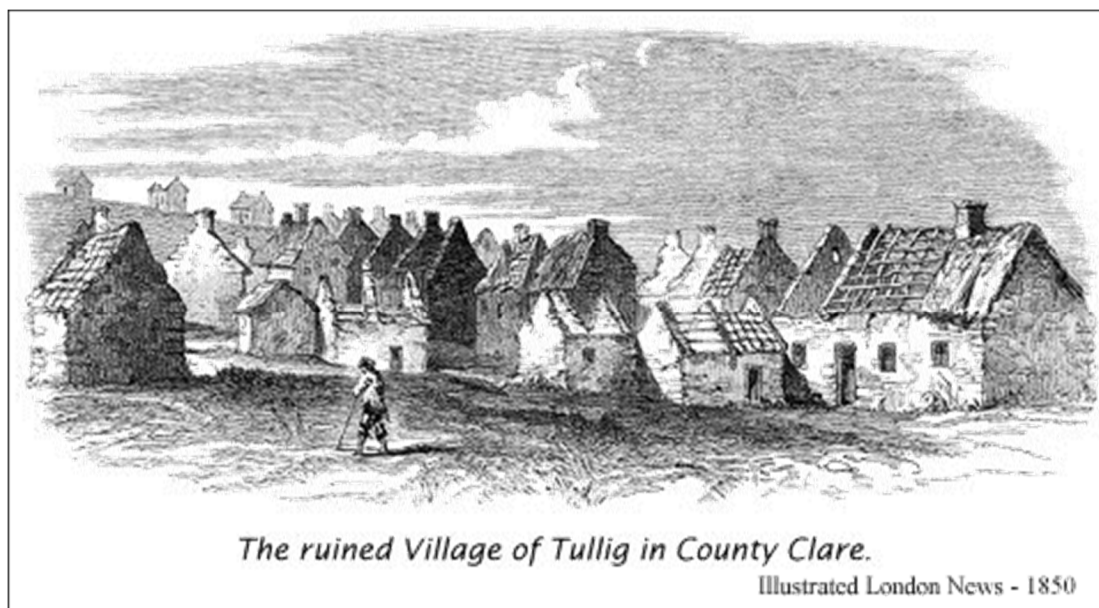


Figure 8: The entire village evicted and destroyed just days before Christmas. *Illustrated London News*, December 22, 1849.

Families were removed from their homes along with their basic supplies and personal belongings, while often hold a “wake” to commemorate their losses. The house wreckers would then literally pull the house down from the thatched roof to the very foundations in order to make them completely uninhabitable.²³ Gallagher states that “all over Ireland these evictions became so commonplace, so methodical, so legally impossible to prevent, that tenants whose homes were marked for destruction often helped to tear them down themselves on the promise that they would receive some gratuity for their labors”²⁴ although the remuneration usually never materialized. Evicted people often built lean-to structures known as “scalpeens” in order to have some type of shelter. These scalpeens were often built over ditches or low areas and covered with bits and pieces of wood and thatch that had been scavenged from the torn down homes.

²³ Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*, 45-48.

²⁴ Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament*, 49.



Figure 9: Woman and child standing in the remains of their tumbled down house. After an eviction, it was common for some women to throw ashes from their hearth into the nearest river and curse the landlord and house-wreckers. *Illustrated London News*, December 22, 1849.



62 'The Day after the Eviction' (*Illustrated London News* 16 Dec. 1848) Althouph

Figure 10: This evicted and homeless family is taking shelter in a scalpeens built out of scavenged lumber and thatch. *Illustrated London News*, December 16, 1848.

Despite the conditions reported throughout Ireland and back to England, evictions continued to occur on a routine basis. Families who had lived on the same land for generations were forced to evacuate their lands, homes, and livelihoods without regards to their desperation. Absentee and resident landlords alike often put their estates up for sale or auction, which meant that other British landlords moved in and continued the processes of eviction. Other landlords simply abandoned their estates and the people they were supposed to be taking care of. Many of these landlords wanted to turn out all of the people living on their land in favor of raising cattle

and other livestock. All of these factors continued to decrease the quality of life and potential for prolonged survival.

As if the lack of food, starvation, evictions, and lack of relief were not enough, a greater terror now confronted the Irish populace. One of the unfortunate consequences that often follows famine is the spread of disease. Diseases such as typhus fever were extremely deadly throughout Ireland, affecting the poor and starving, as well as those who tried to help them. Typhus is caused by microorganisms called *Rickettsia* that enter the bloodstream. During the 1840s no one knew exactly what caused typhus fever to affect people and spread with such fervor throughout the land like wildfire. In 1910, scientist Howard Ricketts discovered the organism causing typhus and in 1928, scientist Charles Nicolle discovered that the transmission of typhus was caused by lice. The *Rickettsia* bacteria would enter through a lice bite or from any skin injury the person may happen to have. Even when the lice died and dried up, the dried remains could enter through the eyes or an inhalation as fine dust. Therefore, those who gave aid to the afflicted, such as “clergy, nuns, doctors, resident landlords and Government officials, contracted typhus and died, though they themselves may never have harboured a louse”²⁵ themselves.

Typhus is an extremely deadly and terrifying disease that attacks the skin and the brain, causing the circulation of blood to be impeded which gives it the unfortunate moniker *fiabhras dubh* or “black fever.”²⁶ The victim’s temperature rises to the point of muscle spasms and delirium, they develop sores which become gangrenous, vomit uncontrollably, and develop a horrific odor.²⁷ Groups like the Society of Friends, or Quakers, along with Catholic and

²⁵ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 189.

²⁶ Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament*, 61.

²⁷ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 189.

Protestant church leaders tried to help as much as possible, however, the bacteria was so contagious that anyone who tried to help was often infected and continued to spread the disease. Due to the horrible conditions that people found themselves in, they often travelled from town to town looking for work, food, and refuge. These same people inadvertently spread the infected lice, dust from the lice, or the fever itself which meant that one person “could pass on infection to a hundred others in the course of a day.”²⁸

Besides the horrible impacts of the typhus fever, the Irish people were also impacted by other diseases like relapsing fever, two different types of dysentery, cholera, dropsy, scurvy, and more.²⁹ Each of these diseases was directly linked to the starvation and deprivation that the Irish people had to deal with. Each of these diseases, deadly in their own rights, caused severe pain and suffering before they took the lives of countless amounts of people. It is estimated that “the total of those who died during the fever epidemic and of famine diseases will never be known, but probably about ten times more died of disease than of starvation.”³⁰

By far one of the areas that experienced the worst of all the conditions and received the least of the relief was a remote hamlet in County Cork called Skibbereen. Reports from Skibbereen showed that “from November to December 1846, nearly one hundred men, women, and children had been found dead” in their cabins and on the streets, while “nearly two hundred more had died in the workhouse.”³¹ In order to prove the reports, county magistrate Nicholas Cummins travelled to Skibbereen in order to investigate the situation. Cummins’s report shows just how desolate the situation in Skibbereen truly was, with the town giving the appearance of

²⁸ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 192.

²⁹ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 193-195.

³⁰ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 204.

³¹ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 63.

being completely abandoned. Cummins found, however, that people were so sickly and starving that they were not capable of being out and about. Cummins found cabin after cabin of people barely alive, with villagers appearing skeletal and deathly ill. He realized that people were not just starving to death, but had no money in order to pay for food that may exist. He also noticed that when residents of Skibbereen or the nearby workhouse passed away they were buried in mass graves or pits. To be buried in such a way, without loved ones nearby and without a traditional wake ceremony, was a gross indignity and represents the inhumanity of the famine.



Figure 11: A young famine victim is being hauled away for burial without a customary funeral service or wake ceremony. *Illustrated London News*, January 30, 1847.

When Cummins returned home from Skibbereen, he wrote to the Duke of Wellington begging him to discuss the Irish plight with Queen Victoria and get the British government to help. A British newspaper called the *Illustrated London News* commissioned an Irish artist named James Mahoney to provide illustrated reports from Skibbereen and other Irish towns.³²

³² Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 63-67.

These reports and illustrations made the readership aware of Ireland's dire situation and got many to send donations. However, other reports and other newspapers remained true to their anti-Irish prejudices, which greatly impacted the amount of help that could have been sent. These prejudices and stereotypes proved to be quite detrimental to the Irish people, especially in the areas that were already extremely poor to begin with.

As a potential solution to these issues, local charities and religious groups tried to help the suffering people by opening soup kitchens to be administered by local relief committees.³³ Undoubtedly the soup kitchens helped provide food to some, but there was absolutely no way that there was enough relief to help all of those that needed it. While some gladly took the offered soup and occasional handout from these organizations as opposed to starvation, others saw taking the help as an extreme violation of dignity and self-respect. Some also felt that taking the soup came with strings attached. The conditions of aid were often called "souperism" because in return for the soup, people would convert to Protestantism.³⁴ Since the majority of the Irish people were Catholics this action was considered to be a major sell-out since it required the new converts to truly act Protestant in order to continue receiving aid.

One particular person that tried to help the disease victims was a local man, Dr. Robert Traill, a Church of Ireland vicar, who established a soup kitchen. Dr. Traill, along with Commander Caffin, travelled throughout County Cork in order to "see how closely reality matched up to the lurid press accounts" of the famine."³⁵ Both Traill and Caffin stopped at cabins and scalpeens throughout the county and documented the emaciated, malnourished, and

³³ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 137-138.

³⁴ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 147-148.

³⁵ Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 206.

skeletal conditions in which they found people, some in various stages of starvation and death. They noted the horrific methods people took for survival, stating that “people ate anything—animal or vegetable—no matter how long dead or how foul smelling.”³⁶ Despite Dr. Traill’s efforts to help provide relief, the amount of people in need were simply too great. Due to the spread of disease throughout the county, Dr. Traill succumbed to disease and passed away, taking with him the influence, much needed attention, and the potential aid that could have helped the people of Ireland.

Other leaders encouraged people to move to workhouses where every part of their lives would be controlled, yet relief would be provided. This was basically considered to be a prison sentence for those who had to live there. The majority of those who were placed in the workhouses were children that were made to learn their place in society, keep their keep, obtain food, and learn a particular trade. Young boys were expected to learn farming or some kind of outdoor employment, while young girls were expected to learn domestic skills like keeping house and raising families.³⁷ During the famine times, however, people in workhouses were basically given enough food to subsist, but nothing more. People’s lives in the workhouses were almost as poor as their lives outside of it, which is why they were not considered to be of much help at all.

Throughout the Irish potato famine, internal migration was fairly common as families often migrated from hamlet to city in look of jobs and relief. With all of the extreme conditions and tribulations that the Irish people had to deal with, however, many considered longer distance migration as one of their only options. Author Cecil Woodham-Smith argues that

³⁶ Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 208.

³⁷ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 133-134.

before the potato failure, to leave Ireland had been regarded as the most terrible of all fates, and transportation was the most dreaded of sentences. But now the people, terrified and desperate, began to flee a land which seemed accursed. In a great mass movement they made their way, by tens of thousands, out of Ireland, across the ocean, to America, or across the sea to Britain.³⁸

Because of the impact of the famine on Irish lives, livelihoods, culture, and future “it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Great Famine of the 1840s was the single most important event in modern Irish history.”³⁹ The potato famine was uniquely impactful on the present and future lives of the Irish people throughout Ireland and anywhere that they migrated to and settled. Even today the study of Irish migration is essentially synonymous with the study of the Irish potato famine.

³⁸ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 205.

³⁹ Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish*, (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 97.

Chapter 3: Coffin Ships & Irish Diaspora

May there always be work for your hands to do
 May your purse always hold a coin or two
 May the sun always shine on your windowpane
 May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain
 May the hand of a friend always be near you
 And may God will your heart with gladness to cheer you¹

--Traditional Irish Blessing--
 --Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*--

From the earliest days of colonization through the present day over seven million Irish men and women left behind their beloved island, with the majority settling in the United States. This immigration pattern has played a remarkably important and dramatic role in the story of the United States.² To many people in Ireland, especially the rural poor, the United States often represented a land of freedom, hope, and promise. Traditional Irish Gaelic speakers used the term *an tOileán Úr* in reference to the United States and its *caisleáin óir*, or vast opportunities for economic advancement.³ Despite the opportunities that the United States represented to these potential emigrants, the Irish people viewed emigration from their beloved Ireland very seriously, often as an exile known as *deoraí*, much like an ultimate separation or even death.⁴ Although many of these emigrants desperately needed to leave in order secure their livelihood, their choice to ultimately leave was not one that they took lightly. Authors Kerby Miller and

¹ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 32.

² Kerby Miller and Patricia Mulholland Miller, *Journey of Hope: The Story of Irish Immigration to America*, (San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books, 2001), 1.

³ Miller, *Journey of Hope*, 2.

⁴ Miller, *Journey of Hope*, 2.

Patricia Mulholland Miller state that “emigrating from Ireland to America was fraught with difficulty and danger, but many Irish saw no alternative.”⁵



Figure 12: Family waving good-bye to their loved ones emigrating across the Atlantic. *Emigrants Leave Ireland* by Henry Doyle published in *Illustrated History of Ireland* by Mary Frances Cusack in 1868.

As Irish men, women, and children fled their homes and homeland to find new opportunities in a new land, they faced severe tribulations on their journey and in their new land that often brought them closer to the peril they left behind. One of the harshest experiences often faced by the migrants as they traveled were the very vessels that brought them to their new homes. The ships, often called “coffin ships” for their extremely harsh conditions, were a nightmare for the immigrants. However, the alternative was to stay in Ireland and potentially starve to death. “A meal, a job, a place to rest, a chance to survive was all the Famine emigrants asked. They left Ireland by sailing ship every day, summer and winter, for six years while the

⁵ Miller, *Journey of Hope*, 6.

Famine lasted, to make the 3,000 mile journey across the Atlantic Ocean.”⁶ It is estimated that approximately 5,000 crossings carried one million Famine emigrants westward across the Atlantic. Author John Francis Maguire states that “there are few sadder episodes in the history of the world than the story of the Irish Exodus.”⁷

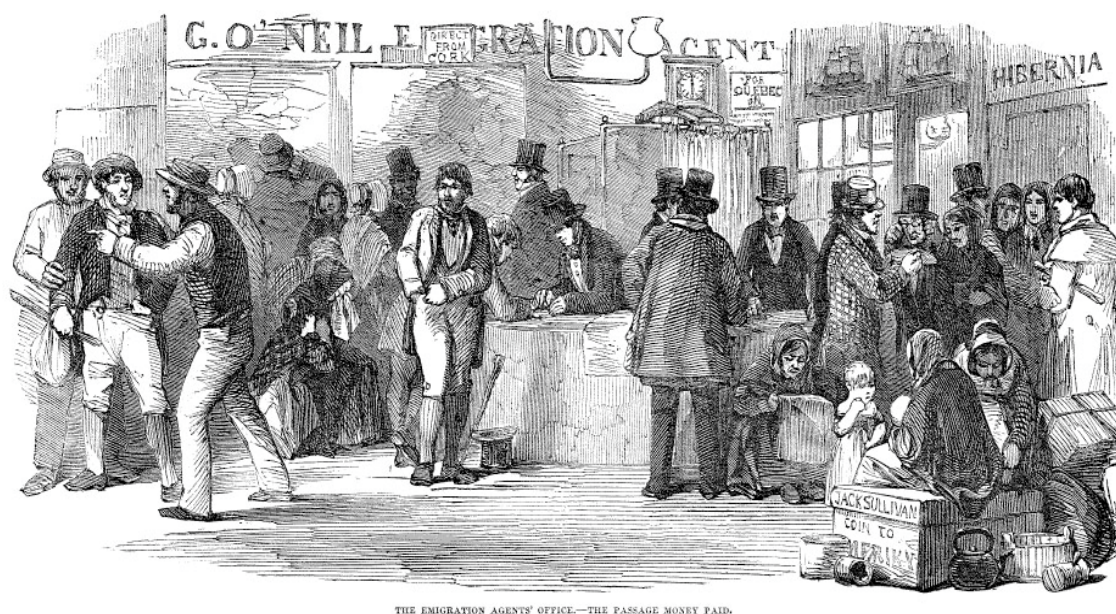


Figure 13: A mother and her children sit with their belongings at crowded dock. Their trunk is labeled “Jack Sullivan” and “Going to Ameriky.” *Illustrated London News*, May 10, 1851.

⁶ Edward Laxton, *The Famine Ships: The Irish Exodus to America*, (New York, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1998), 8.

⁷ John Francis Maguire, *The Irish in America: A History of Nineteenth Century Immigration*, (New York, New York: D & J Sadlier and Co., 1873), 121.



Figure 14: Emigrants crowd the docks anxious to leave Ireland. *Illustrated London News*, May 10, 1851.



Figure 15: Emigrants on board their ship awaiting departure. *The Pictorial Times*, 1846.

The majority of Irish migrants leaving their homeland first migrated to larger port cities such as Dublin or Liverpool, England. For many the only way that they could afford the passage aboard ship and necessary supplies was by literally selling off every possession that they could. Some migrants had relatives that had already migrated to the United States or Canada in the years preceding the famine and could afford to help family migrate; however, this was usually only accomplished by sending money for an individual at a time. For a rare few, the English or Irish landlords holding their farm and home rents would help pay for passage as a cancellation of debt with the promise that the migrant's claim to the land be relinquished, the family be evicted from their home, and the home be knocked down. If the tenant agreed to these terms, then landlords would offer their monetary support.

Only a few examples of landlords, such as Lord Midleton, Lord Palmerston, and Earl Fitzwilliams, kept rudimentary records of these arrangements. Lord Midleton, for example, kept records of these agreements from his estates in County Cork and County Waterford. Using only numbers to identify his tenants, Midleton noted that tenants were removed, arrears were lost, and where the tenants were sent.⁸ Many landlords believed that doing this would be beneficial to both themselves and their tenants. For the landlords themselves, this agreement meant removing tenants that could not pay their rents for their land and homes and the ability to make their land more profitable by converting it to livestock instead. For the tenants, this agreement meant the potential of new opportunities in a new land. The success rate for the tenants and their families, however, was sad indeed.

⁸ Colm Tóibín and Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Irish Famine: A Documentary*, (London, England: Profile Books Ltd., 2004), 140.

Traveling across the Atlantic to the United States and Canada was often a last resort for the Irish. The costs of ship passage and other necessary items required almost every last cent that the immigrants had. Passage tickets cost an average of £4 to £10, which is equal to approximately \$20 to \$50 in modern United States currency.⁹ Only wealthy emigrants, who made up about two percent of all migrants, could afford to travel with their entire families. This meant that most Irish emigrants could barely afford one ticket. Those passengers who could afford cabin passage usually traveled on a proper vessel, such as a packet ship, which made regular crossings. Simply put, you could not leave unless you could afford to leave. The majority of Irish migrants definitely did not fit into the category of wealth, so they usually ended up traveling in steerage, which made up the lower levels of the ships. Steerage passengers received very little space for luggage, usually about ten cubic feet, and they were required to bring their own bedding, eating utensils, and more. The ship usually provided basic rations of food and water, materials for building fires, and hearths for cooking.¹⁰ This definitely varied based on the ship upon which someone traveled.

The ships that most Irish emigrants purchased tickets on were “often old and unseaworthy, insufficient in accommodation, without the means maintaining the most ordinary decency, with bad or scanty provisions, not having even an adequate supply of water for a long voyage.”¹¹ According to author Edward Laxton, the “water ration was supposed to be 6 pints per person per day, to drink, wash and cook” and “if the journey lasted beyond the estimated period,

⁹ Miller, *Journey of Hope*, 7.

¹⁰ Laxton, *The Famine Ships*, 29.

¹¹ Maguire, *The Irish in America*, 121-122.

passengers and crew alike went thirsty and dirty.”¹² If conditions were not bad enough, the crew and fellow passengers often took advantage of each other by stealing supplies.

During this famine migration England and the United States passed various versions of Passengers Acts, which decreed rules about the provision of food and other supplies. Since both nations had different rules and they were almost impossible to be rigidly enforced, there were extremely different conditions experienced by migrants. On average, British ships often carried one hundred more passengers than American ships which made conditions aboard even more tenuous. Ships were supposed to supply “each passenger, each week, with a total of 7lbs of bread, biscuit, flour, rice, oatmeal, or potatoes”¹³ while the passengers would be responsible for any other food items. By 1849, the Acts changed and required that passengers also receive some tea, sugar, and molasses as a part of their rations along with some extra space for their bunks.

Due to the lack of proper nutrition and lack of space, migrants aboard encountered many avoidable conditions. Many diseases such as typhus, scurvy, and rickets which had already been affecting vast amounts of the population in Ireland only continued to run rampant throughout the ship, killing countless amounts of passengers on their voyage. Passengers suffered from diseases due to malnutrition, dehydration and drinking unclean water, seasickness, and the spread of lice. Conditions were by far the most extreme in steerage where the poorest emigrants were crammed without regard to their safety or sanitary conditions. Steerage conditions were abominable and deplorable as emigrants slept on bug infected beds where they often had to lie for hours or days at a time, without fresh air, food or fresh water.

¹² Laxton, *The Famine Ships*, 29.

¹³ Laxton, *The Famine Ships*, 30.



Figure 16: Overcrowded conditions of an emigrant ship leaving Liverpool for America. *Illustrated London News*, July 1850.

Despite the horrific conditions aboard these “coffin ships” and the limited knowledge that people had about these conditions, there are not that many recorded first-hand accounts of these journeys. Only a few complete journal accounts exist today, giving readers a first-hand account of what Irish migrant passengers truly endured on their voyages. One of these accounts was written by Gerald Keegan, an Irish schoolteacher, traveling with his wife Aileen, with the aid of their former landlord Lord Palmerston. Keegan’s diary entitled *The Summer of Sorrow*, although written in 1847 was not published until 1895. These journal entries were later used by James Mangan in the 1980s to write a fictional account of the coffin ships called *The Voyage of the Naparima*. Due to the fact that different editorialized versions of Keegan’s accounts exist and the fact that Mangan used some of Keegan’s entries in his fictionalized accounts, many historians used Keegan’s work with caution.

Despite approaching Keegan's journal with wariness, his writing still describes the chilling journey aboard the ship *Naparima* carrying approximately 300 to 500 passengers. Keegan and his wife Aileen had a small cabin aboard the ship while the majority of the passengers traveled in the steerage area. Keegan described the ship as an "ancient tub of a vessel that has reached a ripe old age" that would be "severely tested if we run into rough weather."¹⁴ He describes the rations as "mouldy" and the lack of ventilation to offer passengers any fresh air. Keegan describes how his wife made their cabin as cozy as possible and tried to help pass the time by aiding other young women aboard ship. He describes how his wife acquired leftover canvas bags from the ship's steward and crafted dresses for young women who only had scraps for clothes. While trying to aid some of the passengers, Keegan got into an argument with ship crew, which inadvertently meant that he and his wife got demoted to lesser quarters. Unfortunately both Keegan and his wife became quite ill and both passed away before their arrival. Keegan ended his journal by asking a Father O'Hare to write "in reverent memory of all who have perished in this holocaust and of all who have suffered in any way, as well as to all those who have spent themselves in a heroic effort to help us, I dedicate the message in this little book."¹⁵

Another first-hand account was written in 1847 by Robert Whyte, a Protestant scholar, who traveled aboard the ship *Ajax* from Dublin to Grosse Île in Canada. Whyte then continued his journey on to the United States where his journal was submitted by himself, a professional writer, for publication. The title Whyte chose for his writings was *The Ocean Plague: The Diary of a Cabin Passenger*, however, this was later changed to *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship*

¹⁴ Laxton, *The Famine Ships*, 57.

¹⁵ Laxton, *The Famine Ships*, 58.

Diary: The Journey of an Irish Coffin Ship. Although quite different from the journal of Gerald Keegan, Robert Whyte's journal still offers valuable insight into the journey of Irish migrants across the Atlantic and it helps to corroborate the horrors described previously. Whyte describes the captain and his wife, members of the crew from mates to cabin boys, and the passengers along this journey. Whyte describes how, as a gentleman, his quarters were quite different from other passenger's quarters, how the steward allowed him to tour the ship and see the ration storage facilities, and how his advice was sought out by many aboard. He describes the rations given to those aboard, as well as the conditions in which they were prepared. One on particular occasion, Whyte describes the terror of a fire aboard ship as a result of a cook fire that was not extinguished by the cabin boy. Although the fire was put out without much damage, the cabin boy was hung as punishment and as an example.¹⁶

Whyte also describes, not too far into the journey, how the first sickness got started and began to spread. The sick, although given their daily rations sometimes dosed with laudanum by the ship captain's wife, were not allotted any extra water. Water rations were strictly enforced due to the fact that some water casks had already leaked and some water had already gone bad.¹⁷ As a result of this initial sickness and newly enforced rationing, more on board became ill and some of the healthy men "gave signs of insubordination" because they could not get extra food or water for their sickly wives and children.¹⁸ As cases of sickness continued to be reported,

¹⁶ Robert Whyte, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary: The Journey of an Irish Coffin Ship*, ed. James J. Mangan, (Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 1994), 13-25.

¹⁷ Whyte, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary*, 27-28.

¹⁸ Whyte, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary*, 30.

Whyte started to take note of sharks following the ship, which according to the ship's crew were a sure forerunner of death.¹⁹

As the journey continued, Whyte took copious notes about the eventual deaths on board, a surprise birth, even more deaths, the changeable weather, and more. Upon finally reaching the quarantine location of Grosse Île in Canada, priests, doctors, and migration officials came on board to analyze the situation. Whyte was able to discuss the travels of the ship *Ajax* and garner some information about the conditions found on other ships, some of which he learned had been much more horrific and deadly.²⁰ After eventually being let out of quarantine, the ship and its surviving passengers continued onward to Quebec where most disembarked to continue their travels into Canada and the United States. Today on Grosse Île there stands a large Celtic cross inscribed with words written in English, French, and Gaelic: "Sacred to the memory of thousands of Irish emigrants who, to preserve the faith, suffered hunger and exile in 1847-48 and stricken with fever ended here their sorrowful pilgrimage."²¹

Despite the fact that Robert Whyte was a well-educated and respected passenger aboard the *Ajax* and would have had different experiences than a majority of coffin ship passengers, he was able to see first-hand the horrors that the famine caused. Whyte experienced the spread of pestilence, disease, and death over the months long journey across the Atlantic and was able to publish his findings for future generations to witness. Journal publications like those from Gerald Keegan and Robert Whyte are especially important in telling the first-hand stories of the deplorable conditions found aboard the coffin ships, how the Passengers Acts affected people's

¹⁹ Whyte, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary*, 32.

²⁰ Whyte, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary*, 66.

²¹ Whyte, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary*, 119.

food and water rations, how quickly pestilence and disease spread on board ship, and how easily lives were lost along the way.

Although these journal entries provide a wealth of information about the coffin ships and the Atlantic crossings, they were both written by and from the perspective of men. Even though Keegan traveled with his wife, there is not much mentioned about her and her perspective is not included at all. Whyte only makes mention of the women on board ship like the ship captain's wife and some of the women who fell ill and passed away. If there were journal entries written by women or from the perspective of women then there could be a whole new look into the lives of those who traveled aboard the coffin ships to make their way across the Atlantic to a new life.

James J. Mangan states that the "famine which compelled so many to emigrate became itself a cause of the pestilence. But that the principal causes were produced by injustice and neglect, is plainly proven."²² Many famine researchers argue that the famine and its effects could have been alleviated if more had been done at the outset rather towards the end or not at all. Government officials as well as landlords seemingly washed their hands of the migrants and their struggles. Mangan argues that some of the worst issues along the journey were caused by the amount of food passengers received which equaled about one pound of food for a twenty four hour period and the fact that some of the weakest people were crowded together with each other in some of the worst imaginable conditions.²³ Taking all of that into account, high death tolls were unavoidable.

²² Whyte, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary*, 88.

²³ Whyte, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary*, 89-90.

As millions of migrants left their beloved homeland of Ireland and traveled across the Atlantic to Canada and the United States, they endured hardships beyond compare in hopes of finding new opportunities in a new life. While some immigrants traveled knowing that they had family members to meet or jobs awaiting them, the majority had no idea of what awaited them. Many immigrants believed that this new land would be like the Biblical idea of a land flowing with milk and honey, or what was referred to in Irish Gaelic as *an tOileán Úr*. As the Irish arrived in their new lands they often had to fight just as hard for survival as they did back home. Despite facing hardships such as prejudices and stereotypes, discrimination, homesickness, and acclimating to an unknown land, the determination of the Irish people won out. Over time, the Irish in America grew to form a large percentage of the labor force and some “rose to the highest positions in labor, trades, politics, the military, the labor movement, the arts and entertainment industry”²⁴ and many other professions. Although the people of Ireland experienced extreme hardships and were scattered throughout the world in diaspora, their will to endure, survive, and make a new life ultimately made all the difference.

²⁴ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 171.

Chapter 4: The Poor, Tired, Huddled Masses Yearning to Breathe Free

Farewell to thee, Ireland the land of our birth
 The pride and the glory, the gem of the earth
 We sail with sad hearts to a land far away
 In search of that bread that may fail if we stay
 New faces glo bright in the blaze of our fires
 And the Saxons abide in the halls of our sires
 Farewell, oh farewell to thy beautiful shore;
 Tis with tears that we bid thee farewell evermore.

--*The Immigrant's Farewell*--
 --Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*--

Due to the Irish potato famine, it is estimated that between 1845 and 1855 over two million Irish men, women, and children migrated away from the Emerald Isle to the United States.¹ By the 1890s the first and second generations of Irish immigrants had settled in to life in the United States, mainly living in urban-industrial areas where plenty of available jobs could be found. Author James R. Barrett states that “there were more Irish in Brooklyn and Manhattan than in Dublin, and more in the United States than in the nation of Ireland.”² For the Irish migrants who survived the famine, made the perilous journey across the Atlantic Ocean, and arrived in the United States their story was just beginning. According to Barrett, “their struggles, both in Ireland and in the American city produced a culture that mixed aggressiveness, a sentiment of grievance, a sensitivity to slights and, above all, a strong instinct to survive.”³

Despite differences that may have existed before the famine or before their migration, the Irish people seemed to realize that to survive and become successful in the new country they had

¹ Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 178.

² James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City*, (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 1.

³ Barrett, *The Irish Way*, 4.

to succeed as a people, not just as individuals.⁴ Regardless of the prejudices and stereotypes, discrimination, and degradation that these Irish migrants had endured at home and would now experience in their new country, these immigrants had a significant impact on the United States and its future development. This historic movement of the Irish people was of huge historical significance because it shaped the political, economic, and cultural development of both Ireland and the United States.

Life drastically changed for men, women, and children who migrated to the United States. Many of the alterations that took place, however, did not necessarily happen easily or quickly. Author Cecil Woodham-Smith argues that

very few of the poor Irish who fled from Ireland in the famine emigration were destined to achieve prosperity and success themselves; the condition to which the people had been reduced not only by the famine but by the centuries which preceded it was too severe a handicap, and it was the fate of the Irish emigrants to be regarded with aversion and contempt. It was not until the second or third generation that Irish intelligence, quickness of apprehension and wit asserted themselves, and the children and grandchildren of the poor famine emigrants became successful and powerful in the countries of their adoption.⁵

For the Irish who immigrated to the United States, social structure was redefined as the poverty-stricken cottier class of farmers became nonexistent. Both men and women adjusted to new types of jobs in the urban-industrial areas of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. After making some money and getting used to the new country, many of these migrants would continue their journeys further into the Midwest, South, and far West in order to advance their opportunities. In a letter written from an immigrant to his family, he stated that he wished “to heaven all our countrymen were here” because the worker can “earn as much in one day as will

⁴ Barrett, *The Irish Way*, 5.

⁵ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 207.

support him for a week.”⁶ The writer continued by extolling the virtues of the farmland he was purchasing and how he believed that these new opportunities would make people come even faster. Life, according to this particular gentleman, could be much better than what was left behind.

In the years preceding the famine, it is estimated that “women made up about 35 percent of all Irish emigrants to the United States.”⁷ As a result of the famine those numbers increased to approximately 50 percent of emigrants. Despite the fact that about half of these migrant numbers and stories included women migrating from Ireland to the United States, not that much research has been devoted to the study of and publication of material solely about the female story or from the female perspective. Author Hasia R. Diner argues that “most of what we know about the decision to leave one’s ancestral home, about the nature of the migratory process, and about the forces of adaptation in the marketplace, church, and club concerns men”⁸ and that this especially true in the Irish narrative. Some historians have argued that writing a narrative solely based on the experiences of immigrant women borders on the impossible. Some authors, especially since the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine and the growth of social history and women’s studies, however, have begun to mention more details about women in their works. However, there is still so much about the women who endured the famine, migrated from their homes, and settled in a new land that is left to be studied, understood, and written about.

Women in pre-famine Ireland played a significant role in the “domestic economy, through some combination of household work, farm labour and (before its decline) cottage

⁶ Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament*, 117-118.

⁷ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 52.

⁸ Hasia R. Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), xiii.

industry.”⁹ Irish women were expected to be subservient to the men in their families and had limited roles in public life. Therefore, women emigrating from Ireland as a result of the potato famine found themselves leaving a very structured social system for a land where they could potentially have new or different opportunities, especially in terms of remunerated work, which not only gave them a chance to earn money but to earn respect. Due to the famine, Ireland had become a country where women had fewer and fewer opportunities. For many women, leaving their homeland became the best choice for their future opportunities in employment and in marriage.

As millions of Irish women decided to migrate to the United States for better opportunities, they were not just thinking of themselves. The majority of these Irish women worked tirelessly in order to send remittances back home to their families in hopes that they too could migrate to the United States. In pre- and post-famine Ireland, the majority of women had worked in their family home learning domestic skills and practicing the cottage industries like spinning and weaving in order to produce textiles. They worked in the family farm alongside everyone else in the family to plant and harvest their potato crops. The rare few actually held jobs in shops or in factories in order to earn a wage.

After migrating to the United States, the majority of women sought to find jobs that paid well so that they could support themselves, send money back home to contribute to the household, and to potentially help other relatives migrate. Hasia R. Diner states that “because women outnumbered men as migrants and as new Americans they played a strikingly significant role in the economic life of Irish America as well as the creation of informal networks that linked

⁹ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 52.

Irish America to the homeland.”¹⁰ As a result of this incredibly important fact, the study of Irish women and their role in the United States is one that should not continue to go understudied.

Author Hasia R. Diner argues that even though these Irish women had ties to the values and practices of their old lives back in Ireland, “they did not remain deaf to the resounding debate on the roles, rights, and responsibilities of women that engulfed American society.”¹¹ These women “responded to this perplexing problem as Irish, as Catholics, as poor and unskilled hands, and as newcomers.”¹² Upon arrival to the United States these migrant women gained experiences that were completely new, either for the good or bad. Many new migrant women were concentrated in low paying, menial, and unskilled jobs.¹³ According to author Kevin Kenny, “domestic service was the single biggest form of employment for Irish women in America between 1850 and 1900.”¹⁴ Although employment in the domestic services was often considered to be the lowest sort of job in the eyes of other migrant groups, Irish women seemed to prefer these jobs above all others. Single, young Irish women were often able to find work in the domestic services through employment agencies or through family members.

Employment in the domestic services was not easy, however. Servants worked extremely long hours; often from early in the morning until late at night with the expectation that someone would be on call at any time of the day or night. Servants often received a half-day off during the month and were expected to meet strict proprietary guidelines for behavior. Servants did “the cooking, cleaning, washing, housekeeping, sewing and mending, and a host of other household

¹⁰ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 42.

¹¹ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, xv.

¹² Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, xv.

¹³ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 110.

¹⁴ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 110.

tasks.”¹⁵ Female servants typically started their work at the level of scullery maid, who did the lowest of all household work such as washing dishes, cleaning floors, carrying coal, and more. From there, female servants could rise through the ranks to chambermaid, cook, waitress, personal servant, or perhaps even housekeeper. Work in domestic services provided room and board, as well as stability and security. According to author James R. Barrett, Irish women “dominated household service in most American cities outside the South, and even in southern port cities, they often displaced black servants.”¹⁶ Statistics as late as 1900 show that “at least 60 percent of Irish immigrant working women were domestic servants, and over 40 percent of the nation’s 320,000 servants were Irish-born.”¹⁷ Although this work was long and strenuous, Irish women seemed to prefer it to work in factories or mills.

One unfortunate side-effect of this vast amount of Irish women working in the domestic services was a pervasive and widespread stereotype that all Irish women were essentially the same: a menial worker without much skill, intelligence, or social mobility. Hasia R. Diner states that

If nineteenth-century Americans thought at all about Irish women, they usually had in mind Bridget, the servant girl, who darted from one American kitchen to another, usually shattering the crockery as she went. Characterized in the Protestant, native-born mind as not very bright or dependable, she was a horrendous cook and fanatically bound to her priests at the local St. Patrick’s or St. Mary’s. She emerged in American lore in the home of her employer, rather than in her own community or her own home. Although there were some variations in this image, she was generally depicted as a foil to American values and acceptable behavior patterns and not as someone of great consequence. Yet numbers alone take Bridget out of the parlor and kitchen and into historic center stage.¹⁸

¹⁵ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 110.

¹⁶ Barrett, *The Irish Way*, 123.

¹⁷ Barrett, *The Irish Way*, 123.

¹⁸ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America*, xiii-xiv.

These young, hard-working Irish women endured the “Bridget” or “Biddy” stereotype as did their male “Paddy” counterparts. Irish men and women were often advised to change their names to something more Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and while some did, the prejudices often remained due to Irish accent, church attendance at the local Catholic parish, and more. By the late 1840s, jokes about female Irish workers had become quite mainstream among upper middle class and upper class New York families. These “jokes” included comments about the Irish women such as “Biddy did not know how to answer the door, having never had a door in her cabin. Biddy stirred the fireplace with a gravy ladle, having never seen a fire poker. Biddy thought the punch bowl was a wash basin”¹⁹ and much worse. Some Help Wanted advertisements took cruelty to another level with advertisements such as “Wanted—An English or American woman, that understands cooking, and to assist in the work generally...IRISH PEOPLE need not apply” or “WOMAN WANTED to do general housework...any country or color except Irish.”²⁰ It seemed as though despite the hardships that Irish immigrants endured due to the famine and English prejudices, there was not much sympathy to be found in the new land. Irish men and women had no choice but to continue their history of endurance and perseverance in order to make their new lives successful.

Although a large percentage of Irish women did find employment in the domestic services, their roles there were incredibly important. These women contributed to the economy and filled a gap that other migrant women would not, and as a result were able to outdistance these women economically and socially. In New York during the 1850s, servant women could earn between four to seven dollars a month, whereas in San Francisco, servant women could earn

¹⁹ Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 298.

²⁰ Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 298.

between fifty to seventy dollars a month due to the shortage of women.²¹ Obviously many women eventually made their way to the west coast for even better opportunities. Life in the domestic services also gave these workers the opportunity to see what life was like in the middle and upper classes. In some cases, this gave workers the opportunities to learn new social skills, become better educated, and perhaps gain social mobility in the future. Statistics show that in 1900, over “61 percent of Irish immigrant women worked as domestics and waitresses; but in the second generation the proportion had already fallen to only 16 percent.”²²

Irish-American author Mary Anne Madden Sadlier provides a unique look into the life of a young Irish woman working as a domestic servant in her book *Bessy Conway; or Irish Girl in America* which was published in 1861.²³ Sadlier, although author of over sixty books, has often been overlooked and forgotten about in literary history. However, this particular book provides a wealth of information into what the life of a young Irish woman, represented as Bessy Conway, would have been like during this particular era. Sadlier writes a cautionary, yet insightful, tale about Bessy Conway and her experiences. This work shows the life and family that young Bessy left behind by migrating from famine stricken Ireland to New York City where she becomes employed as a domestic servant. It also shows the conundrum of being a new Irish Catholic immigrant in a mostly Protestant region, with Bessy being unable to attend mass as frequently as she would have back home.

Sadlier’s book also shows the poverty and dangers found in New York and Bessy’s shock is shown in letters back home to her family. This reveals the idea that many Irish migrants had

²¹ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America*, 90.

²² Barrett, *The Irish Way*, 128.

²³ Mary Ann Sadlier, *Bessy Conway; or, The Irish Girl in America*, (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, 1861).

about the United States being a haven from their previous impoverished lives in Ireland. This book also demonstrates the battle between Irish stereotypes and realities, especially in terms of Irish women and how they were viewed. Although *Bessy Conway* is not often incorporated into famine studies, it offers a unique analysis of the time period by covering Bessy's experiences in Ireland, her migration across the Atlantic, the battles that occur between stereotypes about Bessy as well as those she has about her new life, the adjustments that had to be made, and so much more. This is one of very few books written and published specifically about and from the point of view of a young Irish immigrant woman and is therefore an important addition to famine studies.

For those women who did not gain jobs in the domestic services, they were often able to find employment in a variety of other areas. It was much more common for married or widowed women, as well as those with children, to find employment by taking in washing or textile work at home, doing temporary housework, or providing lodging to boarders. Kevin Kenny states that the second major source of employment after domestic services included jobs as "bookbinders, peddlers, storekeepers, makers of umbrellas and paper boxes, or in the needle trades."²⁴ Women also found employment in factories or mills throughout the cities of the east. Work in cotton textile mills and needle trades soon became a predominant job for migrant women, Irish or not.

Women who worked in the factories and mills often endured poor working conditions in rooms filled with machine noise and cotton dust, hazardous machinery, long hours, and low pay. Accidents were all too common in these factories and often led to the injury or death of employees. Another factor that decreased interest in factory work was that most factories were

²⁴ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 111.

the center of a factory town, only housing a very small percentage of middle or upper class people. This made social mobility for Irish workers almost impossible. According to Hasia R. Diner, “employment in the textile mills for Irish women amounted to an act either of desperation, for the legions of widows supporting young children, or of family loyalty, for the daughters of mill hands, who put family solidarity above their personal concerns.”²⁵ Irish women did not, therefore, often go into these factory or mill jobs because of choice but due to necessity.

Ultimately, the goal of many Irish women who migrated to the United States was to advance themselves economically, educationally, and socially in their new permanent homelands. In order to accomplish their goals, Irish women gradually worked their way out of domestic services into white-collar and semi-professional employment. Irish women often delayed marriage or altogether stayed unmarried in order to make the most of these employment opportunities, which at the time period would have required the female employee to stay single. While most first generation Irish women gravitated towards jobs in the domestic services, second generation Irish women were “streaming into offices as secretaries, typists, bookkeepers, and stenographers trained in both the public and Catholic schools to assume these cleaner jobs, which clearly carried with them greater status and greater pay.”²⁶ Besides finding employment in office settings, a large majority of second generation Irish women gained training to become teachers and nurses.

Among second generation Irish women, teaching school and nursing became what domestic service jobs had been for the first generation. Although these jobs were definitely an improvement upon previous jobs, they still required intense work and commitment. Women were

²⁵ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 76.

²⁶ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 95.

expected to remain single for the duration of their employment and as such many Irish women chose to do so. The attraction for these jobs was great due to the job security and stability that they provided. This change in employment also had a trickle-down effect as parochial and public schools began offering educational training that would allow more women to enter these jobs in the future. As of 1870, “twenty percent of all schoolteachers in New York City were Irish women, and since most were assigned to the heavily Irish neighborhoods, by 1890 Irish females comprised two-thirds of those”²⁷ particular schools. A similar trend was found to exist in other cities across the United States such as Chicago, San Francisco, Albany, Buffalo, and other places where large percentages of Irish people lived.

As time passed, future generations of Irish American women gained employment in fields such as acting, journalism, writing of novels, poetry, and essays, singing, medicine, entrepreneurship, and so much more. Author Hasia R. Diner states that

Given the large number of employed Irish females, their sharply tuned economic sense of self, and their generally successful movement from unskilled and domestic work into white-collar and professional occupations it is striking how almost universally historians have ignored them.²⁸

Despite the struggles that Irish women had to face in their migration patterns to the United States and their climb from domestic to white-collar jobs, historians have consistently neglected to study this part of history significantly. It is hoped that future work will endeavor to focus on the Irish women that have been so influential in the political, economic, and cultural history of the United States. The significant impact that these Irish women had on the history of the both Ireland and the United States is not one that should continue to be forgotten, because

²⁷ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 97.

²⁸ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 103.

“these young women, the daughters from the thousands of small farms that dotted the countryside, the daughters of the survivors of the great Famine, saw themselves not as passive pawns in life but as active, enterprising creatures who could take their destiny into their own hands.”²⁹ These women exemplified the very qualities upon which this nation was founded. The story of these vibrant, hard-working, enduring survivors is one that should be studied and told because it is an essential part of the history of the United States of America.

²⁹ Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 29.

Chapter 5: The Famine Lives on in Memory and Culture

One of the saddest things about the Famine years is that for each horrible story, there is always another more tragic and dreadful. Yet for every tragic story, you will also meet people who held on to hope, who committed heroic acts of self-sacrifice, and who fought to survive and to preserve their dignity.¹

--Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine*--

Reports of the time period discussed the horrors of the Irish potato famine, but only sometimes did they report those specific to actual people. Some of the earliest documentation about the Irish potato famine comes from stories reported in Irish newspapers such as *The Cork Reporter*, *The Cork Examiner*, *The Limerick Chronicle*, and *The Mayo Constitution* as reporters published their findings about the number of deaths due to starvation and disease, conditions found in towns, and coroners being overwhelmed with inquests. In England, the earliest documentation occurred in 1847 with the publication of James Mahoney's sketches in the *Illustrated London News* and the articles found in *The Pictorial Times*.

By far some of the most compelling evidence was found in the numerous sketches and short excerpts supplied by Irish artist James Mahoney, an Irish artist who traveled throughout western Ireland with Dr. Robert Traill and Dr. Daniel Donovan.² Despite the fact that Mahoney's work, as well as letters from both Traill and Donovan provided a view into the conditions found throughout Ireland, stories could only go so far to describe the true conditions and horrors found across the land. Although English newspapers, journals, and some government officials were sensitive to these horrific events, widespread prejudices against the Irish people often led the

¹ Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes*, 3.

² Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 126.

public to believe that these stories were exaggerated or fabricated. All of these factors demonstrate how the Irish potato famine went under-studied and overlooked for so long and then how only particular topics were focused on.

Although early documentation about the Irish potato famine exists through these publications, folk memory and popular memory about the famine has often been brought into question. According to Irish historian and author Cormac Ó Gráda, famine history studied through folk memory can often be flawed or confused because “it is often—consciously or subconsciously—selective, evasive, and apologetic.”³ He argues that chronological confusion about the famine can often occur as well because the longer the time span between the events and the records of events, the more likely it is that memories become distorted by impressions and attitudes.⁴ Since much of the famine memory was transferred generationally through oral tradition rather than being written down, the likelihood that memories somehow changed increases.

Studies of the Irish potato famine through folk memory can potentially reflect these limitations. One of the main reasons why folk memory has been called into question is because “most of the Folklore Commission material about it was collected in the 1930s and 1940s, almost a century after the event.”⁵ While some historians argue that folk memory through several generations has often been found to be trustworthy and reliable, a situation like the famine with this many emotions attached could either mean that some stories have been expounded upon or that some stories have had details omitted. Another Irish historian and author, Tim Pat Coogan,

³ Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 195.

⁴ Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 196.

⁵ Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 196.

argues that it has been more common to see details purposely omitted because of the shame, embarrassment, and tragedies associated with the events of the famine.⁶ Since there were so many negative memories associated with the famine, the things that people had to do to survive, and the horrors that people had to endure, it is very likely that some famine memories have ceased to exist.

One of the most famous Irish ballads entitled “Farewell to Skibbereen” or “Revenge for Skibbereen” encapsulates the multitude of feelings that Irish migrants had for decades after the famine had ended. This song was written as a dialogue of a father to his son, discussing the famine and its effects like eviction and migration. The town Skibbereen was used in the song because it epitomized the horrendous conditions caused by the famine. Although the song was first published in 1880 in *The Irish Singer’s Own Book* and then again in 1915 as a traditional Irish folk song, it was likely written between the worst years of the Great Famine and the Young Irelanders movement in 1848. The song lyrics are as follows:

Oh! Father dear, I often hear
 You speak of Erin’s isle,
 Her lofty scenes and valleys green,
 Her mountains rude and wild.
 They say it is a lovely land
 Wherein a prince might dwell;
 And why did you abandon it?
 The reason to me tell.

My son! I loved my native land
 With energy and pride
 ‘Till the blight came all over my crops
 My sheep, my cattle died.
 My rent and taxes were to pay, I could not them redeem,
 And that’s the cruel reason why
 I left old Skibbereen.

⁶ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 118-119.

Your mother too, God rest her soul,
 Fell on the snowy ground.
 She fainted in her anguish at
 The desolation round;
 She never rose, but passed away
 From life to mortal dream,
 And found a quiet resting place
 In the abbey near Skibbereen.

And you were only two years old
 And feeble was your frame.
 I could not leave you with your friends—
 You bore your father's name;
 I wrapt you in my cota mor
 At the dead of night unseen,
 I heaved a sigh and bade goodbye
 To dear old Skibbereen.

O' father dear! The day is near
 When in the answer to the call
 Each Irish man and woman
 Will rally one and all;
 I'll be the man to lead the van
 Beneath the flag of green,
 When loud and high we raise the cry;
 "Revenge for Skibbereen."⁷

This particular famine song has been recorded several times since the 1930s. It was most recently featured in season two, episode six of the popular PBS Masterpiece series *Victoria*. The episode entitled "Faith, Hope, and Charity" which aired on October 1, 2017 features news of the famine reaching Queen Victoria and her reaction to the stories of absolute horror found there. In the episode, Queen Victoria entreats the Parliament, led by Prime Minister Robert Peel, to do more to help alleviate the problems found in Ireland. It also features Dr. Robert Traill, the minister who created soup kitchens to help the Irish people and it also depicts scenes of the severe conditions that could have been found in Ireland as a result of the famine. This episode

⁷ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, 122-123.

seemed to bring up many questions among viewers, some of whom were unaware of the severity of the Irish potato famine and England's role in it. Some viewers believed that the episode could have detailed more, but many applauded the show's writers for including the Irish potato famine in this popular historical drama. Whether the Irish potato famine is portrayed in folk memory or popular culture, the tragedies are not being forgotten.

Another compelling Irish song, entitled the "Song of the Famine", was written and published in a copy of the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1847, which is often considered to be the worst year of the Irish Potato Famine. This song reflects the absolutely horrible nature of the situation that men, women, and children were trying to endure. This song, for example, tells a poignant and heart-wrenching saga of life during the famine. The excerpt truly shows the atrocities of the famine:

Want! Want! Want!
 Under the harvest moon;
 Want! Want! Want!
 Thro' the dark December's gloom;
 To face the fasting day,
 Upon the frozen flag!
 And fasting turn away
 To cower beneath a rag.

Food! Food! Food!
 Beware before you spurn,
 Ere the cravings of the famishing
 To loathing madness turn;
 For hunger is a fearful spell,
 And fearful work is done,
 Where the key to many a reeking crime,
 Is the curse of living on!

For horrid instincts cleave,
 Unto the starving life,
 And the crumbs they grudge from plenty's feast
 But lengthen out the strife –

But lengthen out the pest
 Upon the foetid air,
 Alike within the country hut
 And the city's crowded lair.

Home! Home! Home!
 A dreary, fireless hole --
 A miry floor and a dripping roof,
 And a little straw -- its whole.
 Only the ashes that smolder not,
 Their blaze was long ago,
 And the empty space for kettle and pot,
 Where once they stood in a row!

Only the naked coffin of deal,
 And the little body within,
 It cannot shut it out from my sight,
 So hunger-bitten and thin;
 I hear the small weak moan --
 The stare of the hungry eye,
 Though my heart was full of a strange, strange joy
 The moment I saw it die.

I had food for it e'er yesterday,
 But the hard crust came too late --
 It lay dry between the dying lips,
 And I loathed it -- yet I eat.
 Three children lie by a cold stark corpse
 In the room that's over head --
 Or sense to bury the dead!

And oh! but hunger's a cruel heart,
 I shudder at my own,
 As I wake my child at a tearless wake,
 All lightness and alone!
 I think of the grave that waits,
 And waits but the dawn of day,
 And a wish is rife in my weary heart --
 I strive and strive, but it won't depart --
 I cannot put it away.

Food! food! food! For the hopeless days begun;
 Thanks God there's one the less to feel!
 I thank God it is my son!
 And oh! the dainty winding-sheet,

And oh! the shallow grave!
 Yet your mother envies you the same,
 Of all the alms they gave!

Death! death! death!
 In land, and alley, and street,
 Each hand is skinny that holds the bier,
 And totters each bearer's feet;
 The livid faces mock their woe.
 And the eyes refuse a tear,
 For Famine's gnawing at every heart,
 And tramples on love and fear!

Cold! cold! cold!
 In the snow, and frost, and sleet,
 Cowering over a fireless hearth,
 Or perishing in the street.
 Under the country hedge,
 On the cabin's miry floor,
 In hunger, sickness, and nakedness,
 It's oh! God help the poor.

It's oh! if the wealthy knew
 A tithe of the bitter dole,
 That coils and coils round the bursting heart
 Like a fiend, to tempt the soul!
 Hunger, and thirst, and nakedness,
 Sorrow, and sickness and cold,
 It's hard to bear when the blood is young,
 And hard when the blood is old.

Death! death! death!
 Inside of the workhouse bound,
 Where maybe a bed to die upon,
 And a winding-sheet is found.
 For many a corpse lies stiff and stark –
 The living not far away --
 Without strength to scare the hateful things,
 That batten upon their prey.

Sick! sick! sick! With an aching, swimming brain
 And the fierceness of the fever-thirst,

And the maddening famine pain.⁸

This famine song gives a visual picture of life during the famine and reflects the importance of studying all parts of the famine, especially the situations that women and children were living through during this time period.

An excerpt from the song “Poor Pat Must Emigrate” describes the conflict in emotion that many Irish migrants faced; in one sense the joy of having escaped poverty and in another sense the sorrow at having to leave home.

Then Erin Mavoureen, how sad it is parting
Old home of our childhood, forever from thee!
And bitter and burning the tears that are starting,
As we take our last look at thee, Erin Machree!⁹

Primary sources such as these songs build a strong foundation for why research about the women and children who suffered through the famine is so absolutely necessary. Connecting these primary sources together with others helps to explain how the famine affected Irish women and children during and after the famine.

Author, journalist, and radio broadcaster Cathal Póirtéir has been instrumental in helping to record and translate folk memory about the Irish potato famine. He has written and recorded numerous programs about the Irish people and has more recently published short-stories and full-text works about the famine. His book *Famine Echoes* provides a unique look into the folk history, folklore, and legends of the famine. In the introduction to his book, Póirtéir says that he feels “that the folk memories of the oral tradition are one of the most accessible, yet undervalued

⁸ Anonymous, "The Famine Song," *Dublin University Magazine*, 1847, accessed January 29, 2017, <http://web.archive.org/web/20030406061309/http://www.people.virginia.edu/~eas5e/Irish/Irish.html>

⁹ Oona Frawley, *Memory Ireland: Diaspora and Memory and Practices*, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 59.

and underused sources for understanding the Great Famine and its consequences.”¹⁰ Póirtéir believes that the folk memory of the famine, particularly those memories from the common people have been overlooked or ignored, while researchers focus on more orthodox topics of study. As a result of many historians taking these traditional avenues of research, even folk memory has typically focused on the stories from men and the male perspective.

Póirtéir says that when official documents have been released about the common people, they have been “translated and filtered by the perspectives of the writers who recorded them”¹¹ yet they help to give voice to those silenced in the 1840s and 1850s. Póirtéir’s work incorporates many accounts collected by the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) who collected memories during the 1930s and 1940s. While the work of the Commission was extremely important, their interviews were happening nearly one hundred years after the famine, which means that they were collecting memories of memories passed down through oral tradition. Póirtéir’s work includes the most use of primary sources all in one place; however, many of his excerpts are mainly from the point of view of the men who lived during the famine years. Despite this fact, however, his work gives amazing insight into the use of the social and cultural lenses of study.

One particular story from Cathal Póirtéir’s translations truly reflects the hardships that women and children had to face during the famine. This story comes second-hand from the memories of Mrs. Kate O’Carroll, born in Mullingar, Ireland in 1877. This memory comes via her grandmother who lived during the famine period. She states that her grandmother once showed her a cabin where a poor widow and her children were evicted as a result of the famine. The grandmother remembered that this widow was unable to pay her rent, and one day while she

¹⁰ Cathal Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995), 2.

¹¹ Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, 5.

was trying to prepare a meal over the hearth fire, the local bailiff came in and took the pot off of the fire, then flung the food out of the door and evicted the widow and her children.¹² While stories such as this reflect how the Great Famine transferred in folk memory throughout the generations, it also shows the importance of keeping this information relevant in popular memory.

Another incredibly important way that the Irish potato famine has been preserved in folk memory, yet developed in popular culture, is through the construction of famine commemoration memorials found throughout Ireland, England, the United States, Canada, and Australia. These memorials “present an embodiment of Famine memory explicitly intended for wider viewership.”¹³ Although these memorials span the globe they remain relatively unseen, with only a few gaining popularity or notoriety. Perhaps one of the most famous famine memorials are the famine statues found in Custom House Quay in the Dublin dockyards. These statues were designed and constructed by Dublin sculptor Rowan Gillespie as a private work, but were later purchased by Irish philanthropist Norma Smurfit to be installed in 1997 in honor of the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine. This installation, entitled *Famine*, “consists of six gaunt, larger-than-life-sized figures and a dog roughly modelled in bronze; though the image of Famine sufferers struggling towards the quayside strikes a vivid profile, they were in fact designed without a site in mind.”¹⁴ This particular memorial features men, women, and children and is strikingly poignant in its realistic, although larger-than-life qualities. It can be seen on a regular

¹² Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, 298-299.

¹³ Emily Mark- Fitzgerald, "Major Famine Memorials", In *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*, 217-74. Liverpool University Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/stable/j.ctt5vjkn.10>, accessed February 22, 2019, 217.

¹⁴ Mark- Fitzgerald, "Major Famine Memorials", 219.

basis by anyone traveling throughout Dublin, Ireland as a special memorial to those who lost their lives or lost loved ones, and to those who emigrated away in search of better opportunities.

In Murrisk, Ireland stands an incredibly emotive memorial featuring a “coffin ship” to signify the vast amount of people that fled Ireland’s shores to make their way across the Atlantic to a new life. This monument, designed by sculptor John Behan, was classified as Ireland’s National Famine Memorial when it was installed by the Office of Public Works and unveiled by President Mary Robinson in 1997. The original title for the piece was *Ghost Ship* due to its “stark imagery: a chain of life-sized, grimacing skeletons” that “twist through the air to form a macabre rigging, shackled to a roughly sculpted ship with no sails.”¹⁵ Besides the ghostly design of the ship, the memorial ship is pointed westward to the ocean and is designed purposefully to signify the journey of Irish immigrants from the furrowed potato fields to the dangerous ocean journey.¹⁶

Although there are approximately one hundred memorials found worldwide, with the highest concentration found in Ireland, there have been a growing number of memorials constructed throughout other regions affected by Irish migration patterns. Other important memorials are found throughout the United States in the cities of Boston, Massachusetts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Providence, Rhode Island, and New York, New York. In Canada there is an important monument in the city of Toronto and in Australia, there is an important monument in Sydney. Each of these memorials to the Irish potato famine is uniquely significant in its own way. Some of these memorials portray quite realistic depictions displaying moving scenes of Irish men, women, and children and their famine experiences. While many of the monuments in Ireland depict the haggard, poverty-stricken migrants, the memorial in Boston

¹⁵ Mark- Fitzgerald, "Major Famine Memorials", 237.

¹⁶ Mark- Fitzgerald, "Major Famine Memorials", 237-238.

represents a type of living memorial that depicts famine migrants “striding toward the American dream.”¹⁷ Other memorials include Celtic crosses or simple crosses with inscriptions based on the events that occurred at their location. According to author Emily Mark-Fitzgerald each of these memorials

share a common aim to amplify the public presence of Famine memory through evocation of a wide range of associative reference: melancholy and mourning, grief and grievance, nostalgia and negation, transformation and transcendence. That some of these qualities lie in opposition to one another does not foreclose the possibility of their coexistence within single projects, nor diminish the value invested in them by their creators and commissioners.¹⁸

The Irish potato famine has been memorialized in folk memory and popular culture in a wide variety of ways. Famine songs, poems, literature, sculpture, and memorials are just a few ways that individuals and countries have chosen to remember the millions of Irish men, women, and children that either lost their lives or migrated as a result of the Great Famine. While most scholarly research since the 1960s has focused on the political and economic sides of the famine, research about the social and cultural sides of the famine are relatively new. Although scholarly research during the 1990s did begin to turn the focus towards the social and cultural sides of the famine, there is still a significant void in the area of gender history or women’s history, particularly as to specific research about the effects of the famine on the women and children of Ireland. More recent research is beginning to study the folklore and literary tradition of the time; however, this is a slow-going process. This important famine material provides personal view of the atrocities of the famine, especially in regards to those who actually lived through it, some to pass away as a result and some to endure to tell their experiences and stories.

¹⁷ Oona Frawley, *Memory Ireland: The Famine and the Troubles*, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 113.

¹⁸ Mark- Fitzgerald, "Major Famine Memorials", 270.

Conclusion

Although the *An Gorta Móhr*, or the Irish potato famine, occurred from the years 1846 to 1851, true scholarly research and writing did not fully begin to occur until the 1960s and then further research did not really gain momentum until the 1990s. Due to the fact that much research about the famine in general did not occur until one hundred to one hundred fifty years after the event, much of the research has only focused on broad, general topics. Much of the current research provides a thorough study of the political and economic effects, while the social and cultural effects are more limited. One reason why the social and cultural explanations could be overlooked is due to the lack of early written records of the famine, unreliable or biased firsthand accounts, and the fact that research into this side of the story didn't really start until the 1990s. Rather than looking at the "history from below" especially in regards to the women and children who were affected, most research has been devoted to only the men affected or to other topics entirely.

Studying the Great Famine without conducting research or publishing material about the women and children of the Irish potato famine is detrimental to the overall historiography of the Irish potato famine. While most scholarly research since the 1960s has focused on the political and economic sides of the famine, research about the social and cultural sides of the famine are relatively new. Although scholarly research during the 1990s did begin to turn the focus towards the social and cultural sides of the famine, there is still a significant void in the area of gender history or women's history, particularly as to specific research about the effects of the famine on the women and children of Ireland.

As more modern research has sought to provide a more comprehensive view of historical events, even those that are quite difficult to study, historian Michael Ignatieff states “to awake from history, then, is to recover the saving distance between past and present and to distinguish between myth and truth.”¹ Ignatieff suggests that historians can help or hinder a country “coming to terms with” or “working through” its past. The history of the Irish potato famine has been such a case, with researchers dividing between the legends, the emotions, and the facts. These historian’s works have brought about all kinds of opinions of the famine and have allowed people to read first-hand accounts from those who lived during that time period. This research has allowed historians to approach the famine from multiple angles, but mostly from the perspective of those who actually lived it, a true “history from below.”

The Irish potato famine played a significant role in the lives of Irish men, women, and children and their eventual migration from Ireland to the United States. Approximately two million Irish men, women, and children migrated during the famine and this vast movement of people had a tremendous impact in the development and structure of both Ireland and the United States. Although men, women, and children were all significantly impacted by the Great Famine, there has been significantly less research into the historical experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives of the Irish women. The women involved in these migration patterns, long neglected and overlooked by historians, were equally important to the history of the famine and subsequent migration patterns from Ireland to the United States. Since women and children were equally affected by the famine, there should also be an equitable amount of research and literature about how they were impacted, how their lives were changed, and the choices they had

¹ Michael Ignatieff, “The Nightmare From Which We Are Trying To Awake”, 1998, Adam Budd, *The Modern Historiography Reader: Western Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 319.

to make. Although the precedent has formally been set to primarily study the men who were impact, new scholarly research should broaden the horizons of famine historiography by including as many details about the women and children of the famine as well.

Oftentimes throughout the famine the men in the family would leave their farms and families in order to seek out job opportunities in the cities. As a result, the women, children, and elders of the area were left behind to make due. Although there were then less people to feed, this inadvertently placed more pressure on those who were left behind. If the menfolk could not find work nearby, they often migrated even further, sometimes to England, the United States, or Canada with the hope that they could send remittances back home to help or send for the remaining family. However, story after story illustrates that quite often the better paying jobs were not found and the women and children grew ever more desperate. Stories show that women and children had to fend for themselves, searching for whatever food and other resources they could scrounge together for survival. Although reports of the time period sometimes discussed the horrors of the famine, they rarely focused on or recorded information specific to actual people. The media at the time often chose to focus on particular stories that took precedence and once again prejudices covered what information was being reported or published.

Although scenes like that of Bridget O'Donnel and her children struggling to survive would have been quite commonplace throughout Ireland during the famine, these depictions were not often published in the press so they were not often focused on in public. While depictions such as these caused momentary shock, the stories found in these lives were quickly overlooked. Even though the sketch and brief story of Bridget O'Donnel is an iconic image of the Great Famine, it is only showing one story about one woman and her children. The very fact

that we know anything about this particular woman is incredible to begin with. The very fact that an Irish, Catholic, woman had her name and story published at all would have been quite monumental for the time period.

Countless other nameless women, however, have been gradually forgotten by history because their stories were never told. Including women and children in the story, and history, is a crucial piece of famine research because it creates a more realistic and more complete study of the Irish potato famine, its effects, and the migration patterns that it caused. From songs about the famine to newspaper articles to a book about a young immigrant girl coming to the United States, primary sources help put together a clearer picture of what the famine was like for women and children. Connecting these primary sources to the existing secondary sources create a better over-arching history of the famine experience. Without including women and children as essential parts of the story, a majority of the story remains untold. These women and children played an extremely important role in the history of the famine and as such their struggles and successes. Their lives and their role in history, therefore, should not be overlooked.

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